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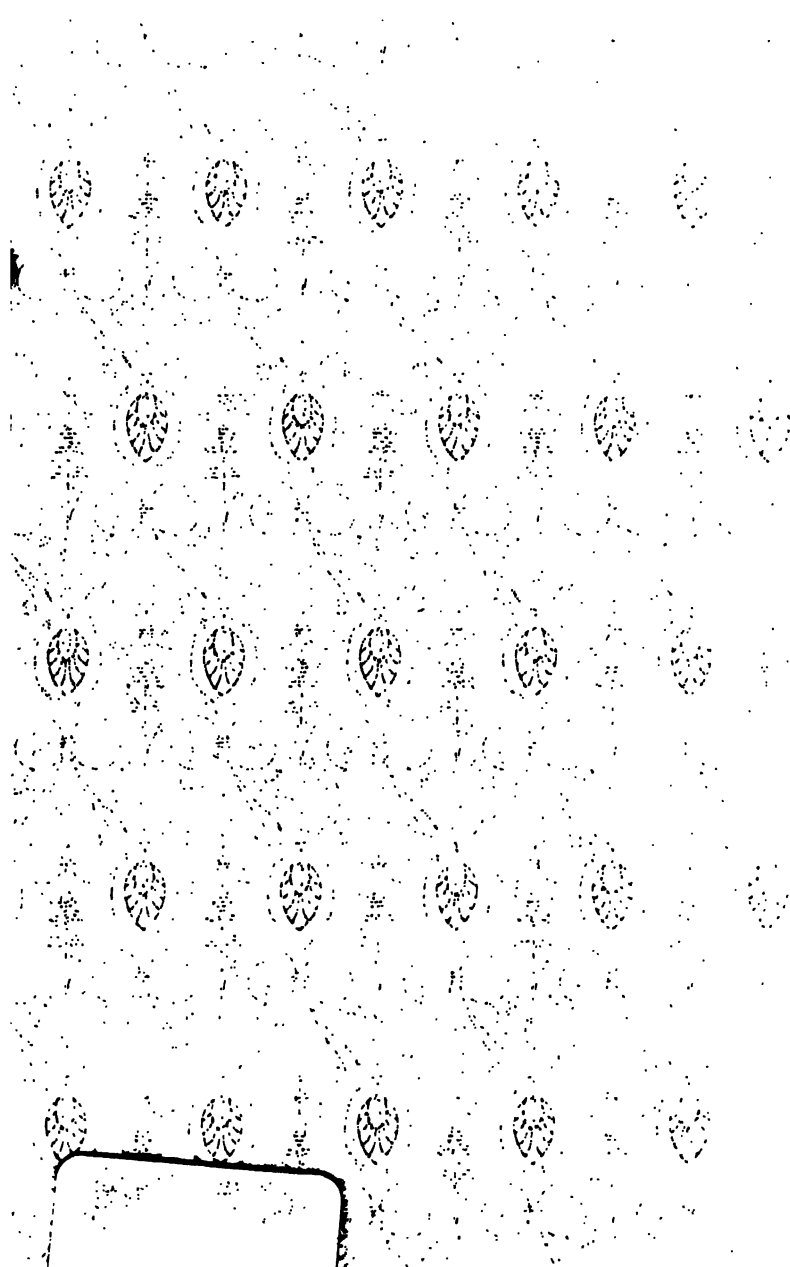
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MRS RAVEN'S TEMPTATION









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MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"DR. HARDY'S MARRIAGE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE WHITE HART.

THE mid-day train from London through the south-western counties had just passed Ravenstoke Station. It was one of the quietest stations on that line; only two passengers had alighted.

One, who stepped from a first-class carriage, was an acute-looking elderly gentleman, with iron-grey hair, who carried a brief-bag in his hand. He went briskly up the narrow hilly footpath from the station, looking to the right

hand and the left like one whose business it was to see all there was to be seen.

The other was a third-class passenger, and she was a small, slight girl, certainly not more than twenty years old. She was very plainly and simply dressed—she might even have been called shabby, but for the careful preservation of her garments, and the freshness of the white frills about her neck and wrists. Her face, too, was sweet and pure and bright; not strikingly pretty, perhaps, in the eyes of such as prefer dahlias to lilies, not a face to rave about, but a face alive in every feature to the gentle motions of a true and innocent soul.

The gentleman had walked straight through the station. The girl lingered, and then spoke to the homely old station-master.

“Is there any hotel or inn near here, where you can recommend me to go and get some lunch, and where I could remain for the night, if I find it necessary?”

The old man looked at the girl. “You go to the White Hart, miss. You’ll be well looked after there. They are kind folk. It’s

the station hotel, d'ye see. Everybody who has to wait at Ravenstoke puts up there. You'll find it quiet and comfortable."

But the girl hesitated. "I am afraid it may be expensive," she said. "Is there any humbler place—a little farther off, maybe—which you could recommend?"

"No, no," answered the old man, resolutely. "There's the Pitchfork, but I'll not send you there. The folks are decent enough in their own way, but it's not the place for you. Go you to the White Hart, and if you set about things the right way you won't find it dear. They are good people."

"Thank you for telling me this so kindly," said the young lady as she turned away.

The White Hart was a snug, old-fashioned hostelry, crammed full of fine old furniture, bought up at the best county sales held during the last fifty years. Its proprietors were old servants of one of the county families, and its attendants were demure, buxom country lasses. The landlady was a little grand and awful generally, especially to unknown and unaccompanied lady-visitors ; but

her frowning brows relaxed, and her pursy mouth softened, as our little traveller timidly asked if she could be served with some sort of simple meal—such as a cup of tea and a little cold meat.

“Certainly, miss,” said Mrs. Fisher, with one swift glance over the stranger’s modest toilet, and a mental decision that she would not care to be taxed with the charge for a private room. “Mary, show this young lady into the coffee-room. You’ll find it very quiet and pleasant, miss,” she added kindly. “There’s only one gentleman lunching here to-day ; he is just come in off the train.”

“Will you tell me where the post-office is ?” asked the girl again. “I should like to go there while I am waiting.”

“It’s a good bit away,” answered Mrs. Fisher. “You see, the White Hart and the station stand by themselves, and the post-office is nearer the other houses of the village. One of our lasses is going there now with the London letters ; so if you’d like her to do anything for you, you’re welcome, and it will save you the step.”

“ Oh, thank you,” said the girl. “ Will you tell her to ask if any letter is waiting there for Miss Alice Cleare. Please ask her to make quite certain, because I think there is sure to be one.”

“ There won’t be any mistake,” returned the landlady. “ There’s not such a many strangers’ letters in Ravenstoke office : and though the postmistress is slow, she’s sure.”

Alice Cleare followed the serving girl into the big coffee-room. It was a pleasant enough chamber, with brown wainscoted walls hung out with hunting pieces, a huge sideboard covered with plate and glass, great windows quite bowery with beautiful plants of all kinds, and a long shining table, on one end of which a snowy cloth was already spread. Its other occupant was ensconced in a roomy arm-chair, and was already deep in the interests of the county paper, which he held aside for a moment as they entered. The maid spread a small cloth at the opposite end of the table and silently disappeared.

There was nothing for the young traveller to while the time with. She almost wished

she had persisted in going herself to the post-office. The girl had a sore and anxious heart, and mute waiting seemed almost more than she could bear.

Presently her fellow-sojourner rose, walked to the fireplace, and began examining the prints above it. Then he suddenly remarked that it was a very hot day for so late in the season, and offered her the newspaper, which she thankfully accepted.

His lunch was not long in coming—a dainty little lunch of cold chicken. He asked if the wine-cellar could recommend its hock, and the maid said she would call her master. The host came speedily : a quiet, civil-speaking elderly man of rather sleepy manners. He could recommend his hock : and brought some.

“ Beautiful place, this Ravenstoke,” observed the visitor. “ One would not expect such perfect seclusion so near London.”

“ You might well say that, if you saw what it is in the winter, sir,” said Mr. Fisher.

“ Many county families living near ?”

“ A goodish many,” answered the host.

“ Lord Weald’s place isn’t three miles off, but they’re not very often there. This climate does not suit my lady.”

“ Does Lord Weald own the land hereabouts?—capital land it is.”

“ Law, no, sir, the Ravens are the squires of Ravenstoke. They’ve been on the land, sir, ever since King William Rufus gave it as a grant to the first Raven, who had helped him in clearing the New Forest. The Ravens are the family here, sir.”

“ I suppose they’ll be quiet-going folk—not very rich,” said the gentleman, indifferently.

“ Why, sir, they’re as rich as rich can be. As for quiet-going, they’ve always been that in my time: but there’s some old residents here who could tell other tales. There wasn’t a kinder man than the late Squire, sir. He was liked by all.”

“ Ha!” said the stranger, looking up, as if his interest had suddenly awakened. “ Didn’t he die lately? or was there a monument erected to him—or some public event of some sort—what was it? I seem to recall seeing

something of the kind in a London paper."

"There was his funeral," said the host, impressively ; "the county papers were full of it, as was right and proper. Did it get into the London papers, sir ? That'll be some of the doings of the new Squire's friends."

"I suppose the old family is in no danger of dying out?"

The landlord shook his head. "There's no saying, sir," he answered. "They were terribly afeared of that once. The Squire has died before his time, one may say—for so robust a man as he was ; he did not see his fiftieth year, and was not spared to see his children marry. So there's just the two sons left, and one of them's not much to look at in the way of health."

"He ought to be, in such a place as this," said the stranger.

"It is the new squire, Mr. Leonard. He never went away, even to school ; he was so delicate. They had tutors down here for him, and he is very clever. We don't think much of him in the village ; he is not like his father

was, always going about among folks, or like Master Frank, the younger son, who takes after the old squire's ways, and is one of the nicest young fellows you ever saw, sir. Yet by the Squire's will he is not to get a brass farthing to call his own until his mother dies."

"No!"

The landlord looked grave. "We can't make out the rights and wrongs of it, sir, and it seems hard to us. But the gentry have their own ways, sir—as they've a right to."

"Is the mother—the lady—a good life?" asked the traveller. "Perhaps it was a mutual arrangement? I can't imagine a young man feeling the want of cash while his mother is wealthy."

"Master Frank was not her favourite; *he* was never kept from school, sir," cried the landlord significantly. "Ladies are mysterious. Women all are—as my wife herself doesn't deny. The Squire was powerful fond of his younger son—and I've heard say that the two parents seldom take most to the same child—which is a blessed arrangement o'.

nature, when one thinks over it. So the Squire must have had his reasons."

"Perhaps the young gentleman was a little wild," suggested the stranger, carelessly. "His father may have felt he was doing him a service by imposing years of discipline and dependence."

"May be so, sir ; but Master Frank never seemed wild to my knowledge ; and people that keep houses like this, sir, are apt to know a good deal."

"Well, I've no doubt the mother will act fairly by him."

"I daresay she will, sir. She's a very pious woman, though not popular as the Squire was. Some people say she's hard and highty-tighty. But there's one thing speaks well for Madame Raven: she keeps her servants. She's got one still that was nurse to the late Squire himself when he was brought to Ravenstoke."

"Was he not born here, then ?"

"No, sir. The squire before him, Squire Eldred Raven, never married, and his nephew, little Henry, was brought here, a child, from

India. Charity Hale—Mrs. Hale that is, as she's called—nursed him, and a fine man he grew up. She is at the house still, though it's little she can do, being nigh her three score and ten."

"I suppose you don't remember this Squire Eldred," carelessly remarked the stranger.

"I don't remember him," said the landlord. "I hadn't come to these parts in Squire Eldred's days; it's many years ago. But there's them that do. There's a moniment to him in the church, sir. They do say it was a nine-days' wonder what the inscription would be if they wanted to speak a good word for him, and yet tell no stories. But he's dead and gone long since, that reckless Squire Eldred: and, in the main, the family has been a good family—with feeling hearts. But it cuts me to see how Mr. Frank is broke down by his father's death. He was away when it took place, leastways he came flying home from Cambridge after the Squire was insensible.—I beg pardon, sir, for troubling you so long with my talk," the host wound up briskly, seeing his guest had drawn some papers

from his pocket and seemed to be paying him no further attention.

But he had had another attentive auditor : Miss Alice Cleare. She had heard every word, and was thinking to herself how full of sorrow the world was, and how hearts nearly as sore as her own were beating in this beautiful country place—which had seemed to her a paradise of peace and prosperity.

As the landlord went away, a maid-servant came in with the small luncheon-tray. On its corner lay a letter : which the young lady caught up eagerly.

If anybody had asked her, half an hour before, what she feared or expected, she would have answered almost in the words of the note she now read. Yet it is only when a dreaded fact is realised, that we discover how large a place hope has held in our anxiety.

She bore the blow bravely—whatever it was. Neither the strange gentleman nor the maid had any reason to imagine that the note was anything but some business-like appoint-

ment or excuse. Alice Cleare had had a great deal of sorrow in her short life. It had not hardened her. But she had learned how to meet it.

When she had finished her lunch, which she did very quickly—and, indeed, she took little except a cup of tea—instead of ringing the bell, she went to the door of the coffee-room and looked out into the hall. The landlady was seated at work behind the long window of her little parlour. Advancing towards her, she inquired what she owed. It was little enough.

“I may require to sleep here to-night,” she said, timidly. “I have some business to do in this neighbourhood, and circumstances may detain me till the last train has left. Must I engage a room now, to secure it? Or is there a reasonable prospect of my getting one, if I leave it open till I see how things happen?”

“Poor little body!” thought the landlady as she answered. “You’re quite sure to get a room here, miss, if you come in any time before eleven, when we shut up; and I

.

reckon you'll not be nearly so late as that," she added, with an old-fashioned motherly horror of young folks straying in the darkness.

"I may be rather late—I may not be able to help it; but oh, surely not later than that!" said the girl. "I shall certainly return as soon as ever I can. And will you please give that"—it was a sixpence—"to the messenger who brought my letter for me."

"There's no need," said the landlady, "the girl would have been going to the post anyhow. But as you please." For she saw the sweet face flushed, and the delicate lip trembled.

Alice Cleare's dress might be cheap and worn—but it was not in small dues to others that she had learned to economise.

She set off briskly down the high-road in the direction of the church and the village. The strange gentleman then came out of the coffee-room, paid his reckoning, and inquired whether the village lay to the right or to the left of the hotel. The landlady went with him to the threshold, secretly wondering which of her neighbours he had come to see,

and what he wanted with them. She was shrewder than her husband, and she guessed he was a lawyer.

Miss Cleare's slight figure was already far off, a mere dark speck on the horizon. But advancing towards the hotel, so that he must have passed her on his way, was a tall, fair youth, in deep mourning. He walked leisurely, as if going nowhere in particular. And presently he paused, hesitated a moment, and then retraced his steps.

"Is that young man one of these Ravens your good husband has been telling me about?" asked the stranger.

"Yes, sir; that's Mr. Frank, the second son."

Now, the landlady was right in believing this gentleman to be a lawyer; and, in fact, his business lay with the Ravens of Ravenscourt, until now strangers to him. He had an appointment for an interview in their house that very evening. He had named the time for this meeting himself, and not without design had he made it some hours later than the coming down of the train from London.

For he was on a bit of new business in this matter—business too quite out of his usual line. But, as he had said to his partner, it was always something to get into relations with a good county family, only it was as well to find out how the land lay. And for this survey, whether it was to be of acres or of histories, he had deemed no place better suited than the old-established, snug White Hart. Now he was on his way to stroll about a little and see what was to be seen.

“A London lawyer, I’m certain,” said Mrs. Fisher to herself. “Is he come about Squire Raven’s strange will, I wonder? He’s quite another sort from good old Mr. Brackenbury, who has done all the law business the Court has wanted for the last thirty years. I wonder if it was the sight of him, standing here, that made Master Frank turn back?”



CHAPTER II.

MOTHER AND SONS.

FRANK RAVEN had never noticed the stranger at the hotel door. His original intention had been to visit the hotel—at least, as far as vague whim can be called an intention. There had seemed nothing to do at home, or anywhere else. So he had just strolled out, with some idea of having a chat with old Fisher, the landlord. It might have ended in ordering a mild glass of something or other. One is apt to resort to such things when aimless and unhappy.

He had sauntered out through the great gates of Ravenscourt, and on between the heavy-eaved cottages dotted along the winding road that led to grey ivied Ravenstoke

Church, with its ancient elms meeting over the lych gate.

He thought of his father's funeral-day as he passed that lych gate. Through it all the Ravens of many generations had been carried, borne between the white graves in the plebeian sunshine to the exclusiveness of their patrician vaults. Their epitaphs were everywhere about the church: on great square tombs, where knights and dames reposed in sculptured devotion; on scrolls held aloft by fat little cherubs; on plain tablets and on half-worn brasses. A new monument would be there soon—workmen were already putting up a scaffolding for it under the great south window; and the black velvet draped about pulpit and pew was there in remembrance of his father! It smote Frank's heart with a dull, heavy pain. A little longer, and then even this last outward sign of the lost love would vanish!

It was the first time that death had ever really entered young Frank Raven's life, though the names of five little brothers and sisters were recorded on a white marble slab

hard by where the new monument would stand. They had all passed from existence before Frank came into it. Of all the seven children, this youngest lad, Frank, was the only one who had seemed born with any chance of life. All the others had budded with the blight upon them. Leonard, the weakly eldest, was the only one who lived. He had unexpectedly struggled through a puny childhood, through a sickly youth, to something like the normal standard of health. Nobody had expected it. For years the Ravenstoke people had openly looked on the hardy little Frank as the heir, not believing that the elder could live ; and perhaps it was a secret feeling of the same sort, or it might be a father's natural pride in the child who delighted to share his open-air interests and pursuits, which had led the late Squire Raven to allow Frank to grow up in the large liberty and unspecific culture of a country gentleman, scarcely befitting the position of a younger son. Frank was sent to college at last, but it was scarcely as a working student. Riding with the harriers, and dabbling in

farming and local politics, does not prepare one for classes and libraries. What had the Squire really intended? Probably he did not know himself. He was an easy-going man, who always felt there was plenty of time for everything. But then one day he died. And Leonard Raven reigned in his stead.

Mrs. Raven was a sickly, yellow-faced woman, in whose poor thin blood lurked the fatal taint which had wrought the havoc among the olive-branches round the Raven table. She had ever doted on the boy Leonard, her first-born, to whose ailing life she had ministered devotedly; to whom she had been ever gentle and forbearing, however pettish or indifferent to others. Surely it must have been for his sake that she had seemed to grudge her husband's love for Frank; though when dawning health had allowed Leonard to join a little in muscular pursuits, she had turned very jealous lest the Squire should supplant her in her eldest son's affections.

It had been but a dry, chilled household life which had been lived at Ravenscourt.

Husband and wife had never quarrelled ; had never had, as the common saying holds, "one harsh word between them." They had never drawn near enough to make collision possible. The Squire had the warmer nature, and felt that his genuine indifference wronged his wife, and so tried to make it up to her by a voluntary submission to all her whims. Also he thought Mrs. Raven was a very good, pious woman, since he knew he was not a religious man, and felt her to be in so many ways his very opposite. He was always restive under the Vicar's sermons, and could not help slinking off to the stables on Sunday afternoons. But his wife went to every church service, and sat for hours with dry and dismal books before her. And the Squire unconsciously held the pagan idea that one set of people can be put apart to "do" the religion for others. He hoped his wife was "doing" it for him. And whoever is once seen in that false light, soon acquires a subtle power, which steadily overcomes the might of right, and the force of natural affections.

In exact proportion as Mrs. Raven had adored and petted Leonard, she had snubbed and spited Frank. And she had not done this candidly. She had seemed more ashamed than many mothers are of the palpable partiality of her maternal affection. And so she had striven to show cause for it. At her select parties she had shaken her head, and dropped Frank solemnly out of her conversation, so that the ladies had wondered and whispered.

Of course, it had not been wholesome for Frank to find himself thus, from his childhood upwards, placed in the sinner's seat. The sense of injustice had stirred the depths of his honest nature ; had perhaps added an edge of riotousness to the innocent spirits of youth, and a dash of defiance to its healthy freedom. Just before Frank left home for Cambridge, he had noticed his father showed an unwonted anxiety, and had even spoken seriously of his future. Frank thought over all this now, as he sauntered through the Ravenstoke lanes. And he had remembered it all on that dismal afternoon when his father's will was read.

How vividly that will-reading would rise before his mind ! The whole household had been gathered in the dining-room, and the old family solicitor, Mr. Brackenbury, had gone through the document with the manner of a man, forced to do his professional duty on lines which he does not quite understand and does not at all approve.

Of course all the real estate passed to the elder son. But the whole of the personal property, with the exception of a few trifling legacies, was left to the widow for life, and after her decease to Frank absolutely ; for his present welfare there was no more definite provision than a discretionary power on the part of the widow to provide for the maintenance and advancement in life of her younger son. The widow and the heir were the executors of the will, and Leonard Raven and the Vicar of Ravenstoke were trustees for Mrs. Raven and Frank.

An awful pause had followed. Then the widow gave a little cough behind her handkerchief—a queer little cough. The lawyer rattled over the remaining repetitions of

“executors, administrators, and assigns,” and the fate of the house of Ravenstoke was settled for another generation.

Next had followed the rustle of departure otherwise silent. Too silent it had seemed for Mrs. Raven. She had rather that Frank had protested, had given her an opportunity for self-vindication. Why did she feel guilty enough to need it? At the door she put out her hand to him and spoke.

“Your poor papa must have acted for your best interests.”

That was the hardest moment the lad had yet known. He would have despised himself had he touched her hand then, and yet it was not for any tangible wrong that was done him that his heart was bitter. It was only his father whom he wanted! If he could but have gone to him and learned why he did it, and how he came to do it, he would have been satisfied, though the wrong had remained. But the gate of the grave was closed between father and son. For the first time in his thoughtless life, Frank had realised something of the irrevocableness of death.

He had turned from his mother with a choking sob, and hurried from the room. Life since then had meant just rising and taking meals, and sauntering about the house and grounds. Not a word had been said of his return to Cambridge. Mother and brother seemed alike to shun him. These were not cheering thoughts for an autumn ramble.

Suddenly a turn in the road had brought him face to face with a young lady. She was within a few paces of him, yet far enough off to give him time to see that she was a stranger—for he knew all the faces round about, certainly the faces of those above the commonest peasant rank.

“What a lovely face!” he thought, and then forgot all about the loveliness in observing that her cheeks were wet and her lips trembling.

She did not appear to notice him. Her eyes were set straight before her, and though as she swiftly passed him he saw they were brimful with still rising tears, they nevertheless looked bright and clear, like sunshine coming out before a storm is over.

How lightly and resolutely she walked ! What was her sorrow, he wondered. She was younger than he was, and how much weaker ; and yet she did not seem daunted.

He would have liked to turn and look at her again ; but it seemed like an insult to her loneliness and her grief. But why need he go on ? He was really going nowhere and to do nothing. Why should he visit the White Hart ? He might as well go back.

And that was why he turned, and so he followed on Alice Cleare's steps—far off—watching the slight figure on its rapid progress. As she passed Ravenscourt, he saw her turn her head, and look down the avenue ; but she did not pause even for an instant.

Frank himself passed towards home through the open gateway. The avenue opened into a circular clearing surrounded by a belt of trees. In this clearing stood the house of Ravenscourt, and gardeners were at work among the fair flower-beds overlooked by the roomy bay-windows of the great drawing-room. Frank thought he would go to see what the men were about. The typical Raven

nature always went to see what everybody was about, as those are apt to do whose mere presence is counted an honour, and whose suggestions come as commands.

They were turning up the ground—to Frank's surprise. These beds had always been filled with stocks, mignonette, pansies, and such good old-fashioned flowers. Elsewhere, in the terrace garden behind the house, in the great greenhouse and the little greenhouse, Mrs. Raven had been free to practise her more advanced horticulture; but the Squires had kept these beds as they had been ever since they were first planted by an ancestress—a Dorothy Raven, secluded in half-craziness after her lover was killed at Naseby. Frank stood looking.

The old gardener coughed as he broke the silence.

“Fine weather for our work, Master Frank.”

“Very pleasant afternoon,” Frank answered mechanically.

“But I'm not as young as I have been; I feel that more nor ever to-day,” said the man.

"While you're let go on in the old ways you can go, but when you're pulled up and started afresh it's an up-hill job. Why is it hard to take up these pansies and these other pretty late flowers and put down these chrysanthemums? But when you've been planting pansies in the very same spot for forty year, there is a differ, Mr. Frank, and though I can't argufy it out, I feels it all the same."

"But who told you to plant chrysanthemums in the Dorothy beds?" asked Frank breathlessly.

The old man looked up knowingly.

"Them's the orders I got from Mr. Leonard," he said, falling into a mechanical tone belied by his twinkling old eyes.

Frank ground his heel into the moist gravel, and turned hastily away towards the house. It was but a little, little thing: yet it stood typical as the end of the past.

He strode through the hall to the dining-room. He thought it would be empty; but his mother was there, standing in her heavy widow's dress, filling a Wedgewood vase from a basket of hot-house flowers. Frank

would have retreated, but her call detained him.

"They are altering the Dorothy beds. Leonard wishes it, and the change might as well be made at once," she said, in an excusing tone, but rather as one who has acquiesced than originated.

"My brother has a right to do what he chooses," answered Frank, half misled by her manner. "I did not think he cared much what went on in the garden."

The widow shook her head.

"Leonard could not put on raptures over carnations and mignonette," she sighed; "but he has always taken an interest in my rarer plants."

Frank, deep in his sad thoughts, unconsciously began to whistle softly.

"Oh fie, my dear!" rebuked Mrs. Raven: "your poor father has not yet been a month in his grave. And he used to think you were fond of him!"

Frank did not retort; he went out of the room, and upstairs to his chamber, taking up a letter for himself that lay on the hall-table.

It was from the Vicar of Ravenstoke, and it invited him to dine at the Vicarage, and spend the evening there. Frank felt glad to go. Any change was for the better, for the lamp-light evenings at the Court were very long and dreary now.

When about to start Frank looked into the drawing-room, and told his mother where he was going. Surely even she could not sigh over the levity of a visit to his pastor and trustee! It was well, perhaps, that he could not hear her remarks to her eldest son, as they stood together watching him go down the avenue.

"Poor Frank! Anything for him—except his own home! You see it yourself, don't you, Leonard?"

"Well, mother, according to you, it's not unnatural," said Leonard. "According to *you*, remember," he added with emphasis. "For I persist in thinking you are on a wild-goose chase."

Mrs. Raven shook her head.

"And why shouldn't he go to the Vicarage?" added the young Squire. "I am glad

of it—for I think Toynbee quite understands that I don't want any idler here, and he will advise Frank accordingly. Besides, I should have thought you might be glad to get him out of the way this evening."

"Leonard, Leonard! How can you speak so?"

"Well, it's the plain truth," said Leonard. And, looking at the young man, one could see that he was one of those people with whom truth is generally plain—indeed, ugly—and who find a particular pleasure in its unpleasantness. "If Frank thinks to stay at home and play the gentleman, he is mistaken. The sooner he chooses some suitable employment and enters upon it, the better it will be for his own interest. Idle men are apt to fall into mischief."

"Is he to return to Cambridge?"

"Not with my consent. You can send him if you like. In my opinion no time should be lost in his entering upon some useful career. I don't care how soon he leaves my house. It's not pleasant to be reminded at every trick and turn by outsiders

that Frank had all my father's affection and I none of it."

Mrs. Raven sighed. Frank had all the open-heartedness, the free-handed generosity of the Ravens; Leonard had none of it. He was narrow-minded as his mother and as fretful in temper. The one son was generally disliked; the other universally admired and loved. No wonder Leonard had become jealous of his brother, and wanted him away from Ravenstoke; no wonder, either, with his defects of disposition and of health, that his speech should be habitually crabbed, and often discourteous.

"I suppose we may trust this Mr. Dewe to keep his appointment?" resumed Mrs. Raven in a low voice.

"I reckon so," replied Leonard. "Lawyers in general do keep one when a good address is given, where there has lately been a death."

Mrs. Raven did not wince at the cold words. She spoke again, half-pleadingly.

"You really think I had better not see him myself at this first interview?"

"Certainly I do," said Leonard. "You might only confuse him. Lawyers hate to do business with women, rely upon that, mother. They want facts, not fancies."

"There is very little fact to go upon," she whispered, as to herself. "You know all I can tell, Leonard. I can trust you, I know. And you won't forget my suggestion about the advertisement, will you? See if he thinks that it is a good idea."

"You must not be offended if he thinks it absurd—and the whole matter with it," retorted her son.

"Do you expect he will refuse to take up the quest?"

"No," said Leonard. "He will see that his fees are safe, and he'll know the more foolish it is, the longer it is likely to last."

"I know you scorn me for these fancies—as you deem them to be," she meekly said.

"I do, mother: and I assure you I have given in to them with reluctance. It is pity that I feel, though, rather than scorn. I believe them to be pure hallucination—the result of a fever-dream."

"Ah no, Leonard. Do not, do not let me think I am acting absolutely against your will in pursuing them. Say that, at least, Leonard, my dear."

"What you are doing, you do with your own money, mother," answered the young man.

Poor woman! If she had ever loved anybody in the world, it was this son; and this was his return! These cold words, this implied blame!

"Of course, right is right," said Leonard in a more conciliatory tone, for he did not wish gratuitously to vex her. "At any rate, the matter should be put at rest, one way or the other: I concede that much. I do not want an interloper in the place where I am master."





CHAPTER III.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE Vicarage was at a considerable distance from the Court. It was a modest brown building, covered with ivy, and full of large low rooms and unexpected cupboards. It stood upon the western margin of the churchyard, to which its garden opened by a private gate. The oriel window of the Vicar's study overlooked the graves of his flock, while the dining-room enjoyed the more cheerful sunset aspect. The drawing-room was at the end of the house farthest from the road, and except for an occasional airing it was generally kept shut up and locked, for there had been no lady in the Vicarage since the Vicar's mother

had died, nearly twenty years ago. The Reverend Jasper Toynbee was a genial man, and he greeted Frank warmly.

They went through their meal cheerily enough, enlivened by the Vicar's own humorous anecdotes of hunt or election. The parlour-maid, in spruce green gown and lilac-trimmed cap, was not required to perform her duties like the automata who wore the Raven livery.

"I prefer that she smiles when I say a funny thing," the old Vicar had always answered, when any guest had deprecated such licence on the part of a waiting-maid. "If she could keep grave for ceremony's sake, I should fear my visitors only laughed for the same. I'm one of the good old school, and am not afraid to make a friend of my servant."

It was only when the table was cleared, and the Vicar and his guest were dallying with their wine-glasses, that there crept into the room the silence which reveals that some serious purpose lurks behind the veil of social intercourse. Each was aware that the other looked at him when his own eyes were

averted. Each frank nature was sensible of painful and unaccustomed restraint. But this could not last, and the Vicar broke the silence.

"Frank, my boy, I presume you have some idea why your father left his affairs in so peculiar—and, I may say, so uncomfortable a manner?"

Frank's blue eyes looked up astonished. That his father had some good reason for his will he had not permitted himself to doubt, but it had not before occurred to him that onlookers were likely to suspect definite reasons of grave significance, not, of course, to his credit.

"I suppose he thought it safest not to trust me too much. Did he say anything about it to you, sir?"

A cautious man, anxious to discover how far some offence of his own lay a buried secret between himself and the dead, could not have asked a shrewder question than poor Frank thus put, in his loyal desire to justify his father's memory to his own loving heart. The Vicar glanced at him keenly, and sipped his wine.

"No, he did not," he answered, "and I wonder at it. I was with him often through his last illness : he had been ailing ever since the visit he paid you at Cambridge. We talked about many things. I remember one day in particular when he seemed very troubled and distressed, but he said he could not tell me why just then. You see we didn't think there was anything serious, till he suddenly lost his speech, and that was close upon the end."

"I wish I had been sent for earlier!"

"You would have been, had any of us apprehended danger. It was unfortunate, as things turned out, that you should have remained at Cambridge for the long vacation."

"That was my father's doings, as I think you may readily guess, sir," returned Frank. "When he came to Cambridge the term was nearly at an end. He asked me when I should be ready to take my degree ; I laughed, and said never, that I was not up to it. He was vexed at that, and said I had better stay and study during the vacation instead of going home to amuse myself."

"He never seemed well after that journey," repeated the Vicar, "though several weeks passed on. The will was made only ten days before his death, by a strange lawyer for whom your father sent. They were shut in together; and by-and-by your two upper servants, Budd and good Mrs. Simms, were called into the room to witness the will."

"Well, all has clearly been quite fair," observed Frank quietly.

The old Vicar looked shrewdly at him, his head bent and his eyes peering through their bushy brows.

"Quite fair," he assented, "in so far as that it was your father's own act and deed. I do not believe a living soul knew aught of the contents of the will until it was read aloud after the funeral—save the gentleman who made it. I witnessed a will that your father drew up five years ago," he added. "Had you any idea what were your expectations under that?"

"I never thought of such a thing," answered Frank warmly, "I never thought of death and my father together."

The Vicar was silent. He had been consulted about that other will, and thought it was well to keep his knowledge to himself, since that had bequeathed the whole of the personal estate to the second son, except a gift of five thousand pounds to the widow, for whose further benefit the real estate had been charged with an annuity of a thousand a year. The present arrangement was a strange reversal of things. "He must have had some adequate motive for it," was Mr. Toynbee's sage reflection.

"Well, well," he resumed presently, "if we wondered over this will for years, Frank, we could not alter it. We must take it as it is, and make the best of it. And nothing ever turns out so bad as it looks at first. The question is, what are you to do now?"

Frank only gazed blankly into the fire; already lit in these damp evenings of early autumn.

"Have you thought about this at all, Frank? Have you any leaning towards any particular path in life?"

Frank shook his head. Yet he had, very

decidedly. A vision of bright hunting mornings, of gorse-clad commons, of cheery, leisurely debates with agent or farm tenantry, floated before his eyes. But these things had vanished from his path like flowers in October.

"No, sir," he answered. "Perhaps you will advise me."

The Vicar pushed his chair back from the table. "It is hard to deal with you young fellows," he said. "You're all so highty-tighty that an old man like me doesn't know where to touch you without pricking himself."

"I don't think I am," said Frank humbly.

"Or else I should say that, considering your gentle birth, which of course makes it impossible that you should dabble in commerce, and that you are already too late for the Army or the Navy, and that the prospects of the Bar are very poor, even for those with marked forensic talent, and considering moreover that it may be a long time before you enter upon your property, why—I come to the conclusion that you cannot do better than think of—the Church."

"The Church!" echoed Frank, aghast.

"Yes, the Church," returned the Vicar serenely. "The Ravens have the presentation to two other livings besides this. I feel sure this is a course which Mrs. Raven will approve."

He spoke the last words with a jerk. They cost him more than all the rest. The Vicar did not like Mrs. Raven—the natural instincts which God had given him were true.

"But I'm not fit for a clergyman," said the astounded Frank.

"You are a gentleman by birth and by nature," said the Vicar. "I trust—I do trust that there is nothing in your moral nature to render you averse to the blameless life which every clergyman ought to lead?"

Frank marked the changed, doubtful tone of the last few words, and his face flushed.

"I mean, I'm not a religious fellow," he stammered. "At least—I never thought about it. And I couldn't take *that* up just because I must take up something."

The Vicar stirred the fire impatiently.

“ I shouldn’t know what to say to people in trouble, or dying, or anything of that sort,” ran on Frank forlornly. “ And there’d be the preaching, sir !”

“ I know you’re fond of outdoor sports, and that they’ve been thrown in your way,” pursued the Vicar, pausing with his back to the fire, “ but I don’t believe a man makes any the better parson (I like that old Saxon word) for always sitting with his feet on the fender, studying divinity. But I don’t want to press you,” he added, kindly understanding Frank’s silence. “ It is but my plain duty to suggest anything for your welfare. That I should do as an old friend, even if I were not your trustee.”

“ I’ll go home and think about it,” Frank said at last, “ because it is kind of you to have thought of it for me. It is very good of you to deem me fit for this. But I must know myself best after all. And it will not do. I feel quite sure it will not do.”

The two shook hands, and the Vicar, in his own overflowing affability, followed the youth to the hall-door, and shook hands again there.

The pain in Frank's heart was keen. He did not understand that, in all his changed world, himself had changed the most. If the dead Squire could have returned to life and welcomed his son to Ravenscourt that night, the two could not have met as they had parted. Frank's easy, unthinking life had passed away ; he had mounted to a higher, though, as yet, a bleaker level.

He had left the Vicarage earlier than he usually did, because it was quite impossible to resume an ordinary chat, after that close, personal talk. It was a clear, calm, bright night, and he turned away from the Court instead of to it, and struck into one of the bosky lanes, which intersected a richly wooded tract of country extending behind the village, and between the Court park and the common, intending to return to Ravenscourt by a circuitous route.

All the Vicar's genuine kindness could not disguise that he suspected the Squire must have had some very definite reason for his peculiar will. And if Mr. Toynbee, so old and familiar a friend, could thus reason, Frank

felt what he had to expect from the rest of the world. And he knew that he did not deserve it!

He wandered on in the rich moonlight. The lanes were narrow, and their high banks cast such deep shadows that Frank did not see somebody coming towards him till the figure was almost passing by. Even then he saw but a small, slight girl, and had she passed on swiftly and kept in the shadow he could have seen no more.

But she slackened her pace, hesitated, and stood still: and, in a low, tremulous voice, timidly asked a question.

"Is this the road to the railway station?"

"It is not the road—yet it can lead you into it," said Frank. "But no more trains will be going out of the station to-night," he volunteered to add.

"I don't want the station," answered the weary voice, "only if I get into the road to the station I shall know my way."

The moon was behind the girl as she spoke, so that it left her face in shadow, while it fully illumined Frank's open countenance.

Nevertheless, he could see enough to believe that he was speaking to the young lady he had passed in the afternoon.

"It is not very easy to direct you," he said, "the lanes are so much alike. If you do not object, I can easily show you the way. It is awkward to be lost in such a spot as this, at this hour."

"Oh, thank you!" she said warmly. "But—why should I trouble you? I think I could follow your directions. I believe I only missed my way already because I was startled; and then I got confused."

"It is no trouble at all," replied Frank—and he turned to move off in the right direction. "I am only taking a little stroll. My home, Ravenscourt, lies in the road you want, and it is quite time I was there."

"It is very kind of you," she said quietly, no longer resisting his offer. Perhaps she was only too thankful to accept it; or possibly she feared he might misunderstand any further deprecation. Frank had mentioned his own address quite simply as a mere matter of fact, but the girl had accepted it as

an assurance of the good faith of his guidance and protection. She was wondering if this could be the second son, of whose disinheritance and sorrow she had heard only that morning. If so, how strange it was that they two should meet thus! She knew what her own sad errand had been, and what her own sad thoughts were—and she could guess at his.

A few minutes ago she had been crying bitterly enough in those shadowy, solitary lanes; but, woman-like, she now felt strangely comforted in pitying another. As for Frank, he thought she must surely be strangely lonely and friendless to be allowed to go wandering about in this way, when even the young maid-servants at the Court were never permitted to be outside the precincts after dark. And somehow the thought of other lonely people often takes the edge from our own loneliness.

"No wonder you were nervous," he said, alluding to her remark about having been startled, "abroad here alone. I think you must be very brave to have attempted such a night walk, especially in a strange place."

"I had come this way by daylight," she answered, "and I took note of the way-marks, for I knew I should have to return some time, though it might have been earlier this evening—or might not have been till to-morrow morning."

Her voice was sweet and sad. Her face, pale and gentle, won Frank's heart.

"You are surely quite a stranger here!" he observed. "I know most of the people at Ravenstoke."

"I was never here before to-day," she replied. "I came from London this morning, and I shall leave to-morrow for the north. It seems a very beautiful country," she added, as if rousing herself to go through the civilities due to her kind guide.

"It is a glorious country," said Frank. "But I shall be leaving it soon, too." He could not tell what made him say that to a stranger. Was it because the thought itself was so oppressive to him?

"This then must truly be the younger son," thought Alice Cleare.

"Well," she said, very gently, and in a

tone tender with checked tears, "everything either leaves us or is left by us, sooner or later. Only God is everywhere; always everywhere."

"Ah, we all know that!" said Frank, a little hardly. "And it is easy enough to say it. But I am not sure that we realize it or feel it much when we are miserable."

"We could not be miserable if we did," said his companion, softly.

And Frank remembered the tears he had seen on her face that afternoon. And yet certainly it had not been a miserable face.

"I was very miserable the other day," she said, "for I got into an envious, evil temper. But I'm not miserable to-night, though I have just looked my last on my only brother's face!" and here the tears broke out again uncontrollably, though the next minute she interrupted them with a half-uttered apology.

Frank was deeply touched. A few weeks ago he might have felt awkward and almost annoyed, but the sorrow he had borne him-

self had taught him to bear the sight of sorrow.

"We two were the last of us," she sobbed. "He was one of the masters at Gerston. I dare say you know it."

It was a village about four miles away.

Frank nodded. He knew there was a large classical school there.

"I only heard yesterday that his illness was serious ; I did not know that it was quite hopeless till I got a letter that was waiting for me at Ravenstoke this morning. But what a blessing I got to see him once more—before he died ! It might so easily have happened otherwise !"

"And are you going away so soon ?" asked Frank. "But—you will be coming back again ?"

"No," she said, checking her emotion by a strong effort, and speaking again with comparative calmness. "I had just obtained a very good appointment as governess in a house in one of the northern counties, and they want me immediately, as there has been illness in the family, and the mother wishes

to leave home for two or three weeks, and to put me in charge first. If my brother had lingered, I must have sent them word I could not come ; but, now he is gone, I dare not lose so good a chance of a home and of work."

"Surely you ought to allow yourself a brief rest and quiet after such a blow !" said Frank, shocked at the stern necessities of life thus crowding behind the sad realities of death.

Alice Cleare shook her head.

"I should have liked to stay for the funeral," she said, sadly ; "but it would not be my duty—even to my dear brother himself. There will be expenses, you see. And William won't have a neglected funeral ; the head-master and his son will see after everything. They were very fond of him. They wanted me to stay at the school to-night," she added, "but as it was all over, I felt I must not miss to-morrow morning's train."

"And can you really bear it ?" cried Frank.

"I must," she said, quietly : "and what one has to bear, one can. We grow stronger the more we bear."

Somehow Frank began to think that his life had been very contemptible. When he was rich again—if ever he was rich—he would remember how many people, not only of what are called “the poor,” need help. And yet he felt that no millionaire could help this girl at this moment : she was beyond and above all help, save the kind word and helpful service which all might render.

Alice Cleare's mood was changing. She blamed herself for having spoken of her own troubles, and for giving way to her feelings before a stranger.

“You must be very fond of this beautiful country,” she said after a pause of silence. “And I suppose, as you say, you really are acquainted with everybody. Do you know any queer person, eccentric or maybe a little mad, who is likely to take a late walk in these lanes?”

“No,” said Frank promptly, “I don't know of any queer person about Ravenstoke. There used to be one or two idiots in the place, but my people helped their friends to put them into asylums. What makes you ask?”

"I told you that I thought I had lost my way through being frightened," she answered, "and it was the appearance of a person I saw which frightened me. I was very foolish. It could not have had any thought of me at all, but it looked so odd and unnatural."

"Was it a man or a woman?" asked Frank.

"I don't know," she replied, with almost a little laugh, "and that's why I say 'It.' I think it was through my not being able to make it out at all that I was so silly. I am not readily frightened, but a sharp, sudden fear seized me as I looked at it."

"What did it look like?"

"It was a very tall person, in a sort of long cloak, with what appeared to be a hood over the head. The cloak reached to the ankles, and there were just two feet to be seen—neither skirt nor trousers."

"Could you see the face?"

"The hood quite overshadowed it, but I could see the eyes in the moonlight—and they struck me as evil; probably because I was so scared. When one is frightened everything

looks bad. As it turned its head one side of the throat was exposed, and there seemed to be a red mark on it—but I could not make that out.”

“ I cannot think who this can have been,” mused Frank. “ It does not sound like any Ravenstoke character : unless it was somebody masquerading. But why that should be in a place like this I know not. Where did you see this ?—was it long before you met me ?”

“ Not very,” she replied ; “ though it seemed long, because I got bewildered. Then in my haste I lost my way, and I feared to retrace my steps lest I should meet it again.”

“ I do wish you could describe to me whereabouts this was,” said Frank. “ Our servants are fond of whispering about ‘ a ghost ’—which, of course, is utter nonsense.”

“ I only know I had passed a stile a few seconds before I met it,” she observed : “ and the lane where I found myself when I recovered from my trepidation had an old, empty shed in it, with the door broken from its hinges, and lying in the ditch beside it. I

remember that," she added, "because I was so frightened to pass that open door."

Frank mused.

"The red mark on the neck!" he muttered.
"Is anybody——"

"Did you speak to me?" she asked, when he came to the abrupt pause.

"No. I was wondering whether anybody can be doing this to frighten the Court servants," he added, as they turned into the high-road.

"Do not let me give you any more trouble," she said, pausing in front of the lodge-gates. "I know I am quite near the White Hart now. Thank you, very, very much."

"I shall certainly see you to the corner of the road," said Frank stubbornly. He would not go farther than that. There was no need to provoke the curiosity of the gossiping landlord and landlady.

So at the bend of the road they parted. Frank raised his hat, and made as for an instant retreat, but turned again, and stood watching until the girl was safe within the doors of the White Hart.



CHAPTER IV.

A FAMILY JAR.

YOUTH is a mysterious time. Never could Ravenscourt have looked more lovely than it looked in the moonlight, as Frank returned up the avenue ; and yet, for the moment, Frank forgot to think of the sorrow of leaving it. The world outside it had spells, after all.

He found his mother in the drawing-room, seated in a strange, half-rigid posture, which almost startled him. She turned upon him a white, fixed face, whose sight and hearing alike seemed strained towards something beyond ken.

"Is anything wrong, mother?" he asked, alarmed.

"No ; oh no," she answered, testily rousing herself.

"Where is Leonard ? I am sorry if you have been alone."

"I must grow accustomed to be alone !" she said severely. "Leonard is engaged on business in the library."

"Indeed ! Who is with him ?"

"A solicitor—a stranger," she replied briefly. Frank had his back towards her as he put the question, and she threw a quick side-glance at him, and let her handkerchief fall over a card which lay on a tiny what-not beside her.

"A solicitor—a stranger !" repeated Frank. "Why, surely we are not going to discard old Brackenbury ?"

Frank was quite innocent in his astonished inquiry, but his mother took him up tartly.

"I think you may trust your brother to manage his own affairs. He is rather more discreet and cautious than you are."

Frank felt himself rebuked, and relapsed into silence. He wondered whether it was this solicitor who had made his father's last

will, but did not presume to inquire. It was not—as he found later—but an entire stranger. For the first time in his life it struck him that the drawing-room was a disheartening and dismal chamber. The furniture was antique, and really very handsome, but Mrs. Raven kept it covered up with some pale striped stuff, not unlike washed-out bedticking. There were no fewer than five huge mirrors in the room, and his mother was reflected in three of them, while the melancholy chairs were triplicated in the most perplexing way. Frank felt an intense relief when, after some talking in the hall, the sound of wheels in the avenue was heard, and Leonard himself presently appeared in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Raven rose and went to meet him. It struck Frank that she, too, was puzzled and anxious about this strange solicitor.

“You must be quite tired, Leonard,” she said. “How long he has stayed! He cannot leave for London to-night.”

“No,” said Leonard, “he does not wish to. He has the White Hart fly, and means to drive to Standchester.”

Leonard took up a position in the middle of the hearthrug. He was tall and thin, fair, light-eyed, with nothing vivid about him except his hair. That was red—the true Raven shade. The late Squire had it. One saw it again and again in the Raven family portraits. Probably the family were justified in their mysterious whisper that William the Red had been their greatest friend and their frequent guest in that earlier mansion which had been called Raven Keep, and whose last fragment lingered—a shapeless mass in the kitchen garden.

The present Mrs. Raven had made the dismal discovery that the only four Ravens known to have escaped every shade of carrotty had come to sorrowful ends; the last being that Gilbert Raven slain at the battle of Naseby, whose betrothed cousin, Dorothy, had mourned away her days in crazed faithfulness.

“It is unlucky for a Raven not to be red,” the lady would say, with a glance at Frank’s brown curls.

Frank had comforted himself with the

reflection that some of the very reddest Ravens had met with mishaps at least as great as those of the luckless quartette ; yet the omen, dinned ever into his ears, had had a depressing influence on him.

During his sickly youth Leonard had contracted every habit of a selfish valetudinarian. And he had retained a fretful look and a petulant manner which made his mean, selfish grasping seem like peevish self-defence.

"So you've been to the Vicar's, have you?" he remarked to Frank, as if the visit were some detected conspiracy. "I suppose he has been talking to you about your affairs."

Frank admitted that.

"I hope he will advise you to some direct course of action," said Leonard. "You have lost too much time already. I cannot think how my father could have allowed it!"

It might be truth, but it was galling. Leonard had never thrown out a hint to this effect before. Frank bit his lip, and took up a book. Presently Mrs. Raven spoke again.

"What have you been doing all day,

Leonard ? You have told nothing. Is anything going forward ? Tell me your news."

"I have been speaking to old Peters, for one thing," said Leonard. "I told him I thought it was only due to so old a servant to let him know beforehand that he must not feel astonished if he gets a month's notice—so that he need not be taken unawares."

"Old Peters—a month's notice !" cried Frank, astounded. "Why, my father always meant to keep Peters on all his life ! He used to say, if you remember, Leonard, that old servants should never be turned away ; they did good work to the last, if let alone."

"Your father had ancient notions," put in Mrs. Raven, wailingly. "They did very well in the old times, but all is changed nowadays, and we must change, too."

"But Frank has the genuine spirit of the fine old feudal lord," spoke Leonard sneeringly. He was evidently in a very bad temper to-night. "It is a pity for the retainers that the generous inclination does not keep a banking account of its own."

Frank's blood rose. He and Leonard had,

naturally enough, had very many slight tiffs before. But never yet had they stood in those relationships which give a deadly point to cruel words. It is not the size of the prick, but the amount of poison conveyed, which gives pain to a wound.

"It will be time enough for you to say that, when I attempt to draw on yours, Leonard," he retorted, hotly.

Perhaps Leonard had not intended his remark for anything beyond the sneer which came from his ill-conditioned state of feeling. But the sight of the passion he had evoked had the effect it usually produces on ungenerous minds—a temptation to strike a surer and sharper blow.

"Fortunately you have nothing to do with my banking account," Leonard said coolly. "And since you know all your dear old retainers will depend on your mother's charity purse, dependent, in its turn, on her banker's balance, you may exercise your fine feudal spirit by declining to draw on it, too."

"I will starve rather than touch any of it," said Frank, springing up with energy.

"You need not fly into a fury," quietly observed Leonard. "You can say it and mean it without stamping on the carpet."

"Try to control your temper, Frank," commanded Mrs. Raven.

Frank's reckless declaration might have been but a form of angry words, which, if passed by, he would have forgotten. It was true, in a far higher sense than Leonard's scoff had conveyed, that Frank did indeed possess the old feudal spirit. Frank had his family pride, not of the ruined Keep or the Rufus hair, but of that ancestor, Gilbert Raven, slain at Naseby, who had sworn to his own hurt, and had not changed, though his oath had cost him the happy nuptial love of his cousin Dorothy, and had let his fair manor of Hatherley pass to his direst foe, so that the Ravens had been the poorer ever since. Very often and very proudly had Frank spoken of this ancestor during his boyish school-days.

That memory flashed across him now, and he vowed within himself that he would not fall beneath his old ideal. It seemed to him

that he had no longer any absolute right to the chair he was using, or to the biscuits and sherry which a servant was even now bringing in on a supper-tray. He felt as if the spacious drawing-rooms were closing about him like the torture-chambers of ancient story. He gazed at the brother sitting opposite him, coolly surveying his own filbert nails. He gazed at his mother, who had resumed her book. They both presented that ostentation of indifference and serenity, which is the sorest and most malicious of all aggravations. It betrayed Frank into the last agony of passion—a simulation of calmness—something like a lion trying to roar gently.

“I think it will be happier for you if I go from here,” he said. “And I think, for my own comfort, that the sooner I go the better.”

“Do not heed him, Leonard,” coolly observed Mrs. Raven, as if ignoring Frank altogether. “Do not be drawn into any dispute. It takes two to make a quarrel. Let him be. He will be wiser in the morning.”



"Mother!—but you are my mother. Never mind!" It was thus that poor Frank incoherently recalled himself to filial respect. "I will take your advice," he added passionately. "I need not talk when my actions will speak." And so saying, he left his seat, and strode away to his room.

Mrs. Raven and Leonard sat in silence. They did not even look at each other. Each had thoughts which the other guessed, but which neither cared to utter. At last Mrs. Raven spoke, softly.

"Do you think you enlisted Mr. Dewe's interest, Leonard?"

"He's quite ready to take the matter up," was the reply, given curtly.

"What did he think of my idea of the advertisement?"

"He approved it," said Leonard. "Probably he thought that it could do no harm. He took it with him to Standchester to-night. It will be in the paper to-morrow."

"Leonard, I see by your tone that you disbelieve me still!"

"I cannot help it, mother. I think, as I

have said to you all along, that this wild fancy of yours can be nothing but the result of a fever-dream that came to you in your sickness."

Little sleep had Frank Raven that night. The moon came out behind the old trees outside his bedroom window and cast their shadows on his white window-curtains, and he lay and watched the waving boughs as they swayed to and fro, like hands that warned or beckoned. Wild plans were surging through his brain.

His sole possession in the world was a hundred pounds, lying in his name in the bank at Cambridge. And, for a young man of his breeding and degree, that was infinitely less than the half-crown with which Hodge, the ploughboy, starts to seek his fortune. One thing only he decided on. He must leave Ravenstoke as soon as possible. He must go to London. There, much would be possible and endurable which would be impossible and unbearable here.

Next morning at table, a letter lay beside his plate, and a light flashed over his face

when he saw its superscription and post-mark.

It was from his cousin, Philip Connell—the eldest son of the late Squire's only sister Millicent, who had not married according to the Raven views, since her choice had fallen on a Dissenting minister, the son of a Manchester manufacturer, not very rich, and on the Radical side in politics. The Ravens and the Connells had seen nothing of each other for years; but since young Philip Connell had "eaten his dinners" in Lincoln's Inn, he had spent some few days of the shooting season at Ravenscourt. He and Frank had struck up a careless, good-humoured intimacy, in which the balance of patronage was decidedly on the side of the fluent and assured young barrister.

"DEAR FRANK," ran the letter.

"I am back in London now. Will you not be the better for a little change? What do you say to coming here, and spending a few weeks with me? Town is getting empty, so we could be very quiet and yet

cheerful enough. Do come at once, without any delay or ceremony, and take what you find of bachelor's luck.

“ Always faithfully, your cousin,

“ PHILIP CONNELL.”

It is odd how often circumstances conspire to carry through half-formed plans. Frank was cooler this morning. But this invitation kept his resolution up to the mark, and yet saved any re-opening of the previous evening's acrimony.

Mrs. Raven offered no opposition to the plan. And the preparations for Frank's journey were briefly made. Charity Hale, old now, yet active and bitter of speech, came from the servants' hall to aid him. She had held a position in the Raven nursery during the orphaned infancy of the late Squire, and she had lingered on in the household, performing those miscellaneous duties which are apt to slip between the fingers of the modern servant, and she was not looked upon by either masters or domestics as a menial. Her preference for

the younger son, Frank, had been always openly declared. She had been heard to call Leonard "a poor mess of a man," nor did she always speak very respectfully of Mrs. Raven.

"I never thought to see the Squire out," she remarked to Frank, as she smoothed down the coats he lifted from his wardrobe, "and I never thought to see the day when you would be going away from Ravenscourt—and not even wanting to stay either!"

"Going away!" echoed Frank, with a leap of his heart. "Haven't I often gone away before?"

Charity Hale shook her head, and smiled grimly.

"The old faces go, and the new ones come," she said, "and there's many queer up-turns in this world. I should not wonder now if the mistress were to take some young lady to live here as her companion."

Frank wondered what the old woman was driving at. He did not resent her familiarity. Nothing strikes us as too familiar in those on whose foot we have "ridden to Banbury

Cross," who have washed our faces and combed our hair. Frank had no especial love for Charity Hale, but she was an accustomed figure in his life. He might not have chosen her among old women, just as he might not have selected the old clock in the hall, had his choice been taken. But there was the clock, and here was the woman.

"You always were reasonable, Mr. Frank," she went on. "You've not been the mistress's favourite at home, but don't let that downhearten you. The Raven red hair goes for nothing outside Ravenstoke, sir. Here's the county paper for to-day, too," she added, peering into his face. "Your mamma was very particular in asking for it this morning, so I expect there's something special in it."

"Thank you," said Frank.

"She seemed to find something interesting among the advertisements, for she pointed to one with her finger and passed it to Mr. Leonard," ran on Charity. "I dare say you'll make out what it was. It may interest you too."

"Put it over the clothes in the port-

manteau," said Frank, to humour the old woman. "It will keep out the dust, and make me think of you, Charity, when I open the box in London this evening."

"Ah, I don't think much of London," observed Charity. "Except that it's bigger, I reckon it's much the same as Ravenstoke ; and I know what that is. Places are like fleas : the worse looking when they're magnified."

By half-past eleven Frank was on his way to the station ; and as he passed the White Hart, it was not unnatural that he should remember how that stranger girl, with a heart sad as his own, but a strength far greater, had already started off in an opposite direction to that in which he was about to journey.





CHAPTER V.

IN THE TEMPLE.

THE brightness of the long summer twilight was still lingering when Frank Raven alighted from his cab, under the trees of King's Bench Walk, in the Temple.

He paid the driver ; and then, guided by the names on the doorposts, and carrying his little valise in his own hand, he mounted to the topmost storey of one of the dingy mansions.

There he found a door bearing the name of Mr. Philip Connell. It stood half open, with a bundle of washing blocking it up, and Frank's rap met with no more ceremony than an invitation to "come in" from his cousin's

own voice, while an elderly woman came forward and pushed the bundle aside, begging pardon for its appearance.

Frank advanced into the chamber. Philip Connell was seated, cigar in mouth, in a low lounging-chair. There were coffee-cups and scraps of toast among the newspapers and books on the table beside him. When he recognised his guest, he sprang up in astonishment.

"Frank, old boy, so glad to see you! But really I did not expect you till to-morrow, so you must excuse all shortcomings. It's a mercy Mrs. Biggs is here at this hour. Here! Mrs. Biggs!" he called in a loud voice; and it brought in the woman. "Will you kindly get a cup of tea and a cottage loaf; and get two nice mutton-chops? At once, please. This is a visitor from a long journey."

Then he added, aside to Frank, as she moved away to obey his orders, "I always explain any extra job to the old lady. It sweetens her temper, and I find does no harm to the viands."

Philip rattled away with his pleasant com-

monplaces. Presently, meeting little response, it struck him that his visitor was sad and absent ; and remembering that new grave at Ravenstoke, the young barrister kindly turned his light tongue to a graver tune.

"You can't think how welcome you are, Frank," he said ; "all the more so that I did not hope my letter would meet with so prompt a response—even if it got a favourable answer at all. We were often talking about you when I was lately at home in Colburn, Frank. My mother thought it strange there should be sickness in our house and at Ravenscourt at the same time. And how are my aunt and Leonard ?"

"Quite well, thank you," Frank replied. "I had made up my mind to come to London before I got your invitation, Philip," he added with some effort.

"Indeed !" said young Connell, his eyes widening. "To see me ?"

"I—I don't know," answered candid Frank.

Philip Connell got an inkling that something had gone wrong ; and with a ready and

intelligent sympathy, for which everybody might not have credited that random youth, he pressed matters no further then, but set himself zealously to the performance of his part as host, talking about anything and everything : last night's debate, the new novel, or the fresh play. Frank Raven listened and replied like a man in a dream. At length, tea over, the two lit their cigars, and drew their chairs to the window, set wide open in the sultry dusk.

Frank felt like an impostor. He could not bear that Philip should continue to regard him as the well-provided son of Ravenstoke when he had begun to feel himself but a vague adventurer. With flushing cheek, Frank sat leaning forward, chin in hand and elbow on knee, gazing at the moon. Philip leaned back ; stealing, from time to time, an observant glance at his cousin.

" Did you see my father's will in the paper, Phil ?" Frank asked in a low voice.

" Well, I did," said Philip. " I saw it one day when there was a press of news, so that it was very prettily curtailed."

"I dare say my name was not mentioned at all," Frank went on, with nervous resolution, "for I come in for nothing at all just now."

"That I call a downright shame!" exclaimed Philip.

"Leonard has the estate, of course; and my mother has all the money for her lifetime, and I am to come in afterwards."

"Well, well," said Philip, shaking out his meerschaum and refilling it, "that's a queer arrangement. But, of course, she'll do handsomely by you. She couldn't do less."

"Of course she would," Frank eagerly assented. "But I've made a fool of myself. I can't deny that it did seem rather hard, but my father had every right to do what he would with his own. Only I'd been brought up to like a life that one can't live upon nothing; and—and I don't know what I'm fit for. A fellow cannot get a living by sitting well in the saddle, or by being a crack cricketer—not if he's a gentleman!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" interrupted Philip. "How did you make a

fool of yourself? As to its being rather hard, it is confoundedly hard. And I'd have said so, downright, myself"—and the young barrister smoked emphatically. "But as for your having to get a living, it must be mere stuff and nonsense!"

"It might have been better if I had spoken out at once, too," said Frank meekly. "Instead of that, I kept it rankling within me. And when Leonard began to speak of my future course—quite naturally and properly, and it was very kind of him—then I felt it as if he were giving me a stab; and I flew into a rage, and out came my bitterness. All at the wrong time, and under the wrong circumstances."

"And then?" prompted Philip, for Frank paused.

"And then the end of it is," said poor Frank desperately, "I feel I must begin to depend on my own resources. And I don't know what they are! If I did, I should not mind anything else," he added, thinking of that lonely little governess, and the brave face she turned on her self-dependent life.

Long and long the cousins talked, drawn up side by side at the narrow window, within hearing of the hum of mighty London, and miles and miles away from quiet Ravenscourt, with the birds' nests in the old oaks standing round it.

When Philip had heard the whole history, he acknowledged that it was quite natural in Frank to have made that rash resolution, of not depending on them for money ; he might have made it himself, but then he was sure he should have intended to keep it in the spirit rather than the letter. He felt certain that Mrs. Raven would never permit such a course ; he knew what mothers were. Frank might make believe to take his own way, if he liked ; he would have to give it up in the end, to save her from breaking her heart.

And then Frank felt that though he had striven hard to tell his story truly, yet something had escaped in the telling. And he was glad of it. The heart knows its own bitterness, and is well satisfied to hide it !

Philip kept up his argument. "Would Frank have held to his word, had he vowed

to burn down Ravenscourt, church, vicarage, and village?"

"No," said Frank, turning upon him brightly. "It is to one's honour to repent of vows that must injure others. But when we think we see what is right to do, we have no right to draw back because we find how hard it is."

"Yours—what I gather of them—are fine ideas," said Philip Connell thoughtfully. "The worst of it is, that it takes money to keep them up. They suited you at Ravenscourt, no doubt. But if you carry them into any profession, I don't know how you'll get on. If one has to make one's way in the world, one must walk through a little dirt, and never mind the splashes!"

"That isn't honour!" cried poor Frank.

"I suppose I have no right to know what honour is," said Mr. Connell good-humouredly. "You county families hold the monopoly, while my genealogy goes no further than a grandfather who made his money in a cotton mill. (I only wish he had made a little more!) You know the female grafts don't count for

much in a family tree, Frank, but I suppose it is some of my mother's blood in my veins which makes me feel you are a good bit in the right. I would help you, my boy, if I could."

"I can't believe the world is all sham and humbug," said Frank warmly. "I can't believe there isn't anybody in it who sticks to his principles."

"There are some who do. But we barristers have to—upon my word, I think the best I can do for you is to introduce you to my old friend Gertrude Agate," broke off Philip. "I can't see how she can help you, but she may. And now I'll just go and look at your bedroom, and see if Mrs. Biggs has made everything satisfactory. I know the Ravens go to bed early, but I hope I shan't disturb you if I sit up here a little longer. That is one of my bad London habits."

Philip Connell took his cousin to his chamber, and with one or two closings of open drawers and slight disposings of toilet knickknacks, he left Frank to his repose; Frank being quite innocent that his host him-

self had no better resting-place than a dark closet, furnished with an old ottoman, a blanket, and a railway rug. Philip had intended to fit it up slightly as a temporary dormitory for himself, should his cousin accept his invitation. Perhaps a hope had floated through Philip's mind hazily that he might recruit his own shattered finances by some modest loan from the young cousin of better fortune. He was very poor ; but he did not despond more than he had desponded yesterday ; no, nor so much. He was one of those queer people whose spirits rise as their fortunes sink, who are quite convinced that when one door shuts, another opens, and who find a pleasurable excitement in wondering what it will be. It is a cheery nature which makes hardship and anxiety into a kind of cheerful game of chance !

Without one grudging remembrance of the hours he had lost with Frank, Philip Connell sat down, a wet towel round his head, to write a review of a book he had not read, but which must be well praised in next day's *Evening Coach*.

Frank Raven slept heavily, but woke early, roused by his cousin rising from his finished midnight task, and wearily creeping away to the closet and the ottoman. The London daylight came grey and sluggish through the dingy brown curtains. How bright and fresh the light would break over the birds' nests in the oaks by Ravenscourt! "O father, father, why did you go away, and make it all so hard? O mother, mother, if your boy could only feel in his heart of hearts that you yearn towards him, as you wake in your lonely bed!"

An old judge's faded portrait looked down from the wall and held its peace. Hot tears might fall on the pillow below. If they did, who should know?

In the morning, when Frank opened his portmanteau, he lifted out the newspaper which Charity Hale had spread over his clothes, and something in it caught his eye. It was only a line printed in capital letters, at the top of that column wherein New Forest farmers announced their withdrawal from responsibility for their wives' debts, or New Forest lovers telegraphed to each other in

very simple cipher. But this line only set forth a date—

“THE 4TH OF SEPTEMBER, 1835.”

It was the date of Frank's own birthday.

“I wonder what that means?” he pondered. “It was the time when one unlucky fellow came into the world. I hope it means better fortune of some sort for somebody. Anyway, it can't concern me.”





CHAPTER VI.

THE FRONT PARLOUR AND THE BACK.

FRANK RAVEN had to get through his first day in London chiefly by himself. Philip Connell had to be out, and could do no more for his cousin than make him free of his books and his cigar-case. He began to wonder whom Philip meant to take him to see. He had heard nothing beyond her name—Gertrude Agate. Philip had not recurred to the subject: probably he had forgotten his own suggestion.

Mr. Connell came in, breathlessly apologizing for having been detained so long, and they got through their dinner rather hastily.

"Come along now, Frank!" said Philip;

"we will go off and see Miss Agate. I hope you won't be frightened by her. Not that she is at all frightful, only she is a very different style of person, and surrounded by a very different order of things, from what you have been accustomed to. I shan't tell you anything beforehand. Life has not so many sensations that I can afford to miss the sight of your bewilderment."

They had a long walk. It ended in one of those poor streets which lie between Oxford Street and the New Road. Some of these streets had had, in their day, no mean pretensions to gentility, but they were now decayed, and full of struggles for bare existence. Still, it was streets such as these which had always captivated Frank's imagination during his brief London experiences in days gone by. The very faces he met in these places, swiftly passing by, had suggested to him endless possibilities of romance and tragedy. And he had implicit faith in the cloaked foreigners who stalk in such corners. Even when they were Frenchmen—the refugee republicans of those days—Frank was more

sympathetic than might have been expected from his Conservative breeding. But the Tories who had led his politics were of the sound, old-fashioned sort, who can forgive a Frenchman anything except contentment with his country or himself.

They turned into one of the quieter streets, where the traces of decay and poverty were at least decorous. Philip paused before a door in no way differing from all the doors around. Its handle and knocker might be a little brighter, but its paint was as poor and worn, and there was the regulation display of bells on its post. Philip pulled the lowest of them.

The door was opened by a little faded woman servant, hardly of middle age, with a scared expression of face. It brightened into a pale smile when she recognised Mr. Connell.

"Ha, Davies," said that gentleman cheerily. "How are you? And is Miss Agate at home and disengaged?"

Evidently his voice was already heard within, for from the parlour came words

in a clear, ringing tone, inviting him to enter.

Philip advanced with all his graceful self-possession. "I will not apologize for bringing my cousin to see you without express permission, Miss Agate," he said, "for you are the only person I know who can never be taken by surprise."

"Come in, certainly," answered the ringing voice. "My tea is just ready. And here are my cups and saucers."

"Miss Agate, allow me to introduce my cousin, Frank Raven, from Ravenstoke," said Philip, when they were fairly in the room.

A slight, upright figure rose to welcome them. That was all Frank could see at first, for the figure stood against the light, and it was already so late in the gloaming that the room was quite shadowy. Frank bowed, but the lady held out her hand.

"You are Mr. Connell's cousin," she said, "and therefore I think we may shake hands. And will you sit down on that chair with the green cushion? and do you take milk and sugar in your tea? Mr. Connell takes only

milk, and therefore I shall serve him first, or I shall be sure to forget his whims."

The words of the welcome might be homely, but there could be no mistake that she who uttered them was a lady. And when the faded little serving woman brought in a lamp, and Frank could clearly see his hostess's face, it did not belie her tone and manner. Frank was no connoisseur in female loveliness: only he knew the faces he liked. He had liked the face of that little lonely governess in the Ravenstoke lanes. And he liked this one.

It was a curiously straight face. The line of brow and chin was strictly even; all the angles of the countenance were right angles. Its contour was a little worn, and it was almost colourless; but the complexion had a clearness and transparency which suggested perfect, if finely poised, health.

"And where is Miss Evelyn to-night?" asked Philip.

"She has gone to a little evening party," answered Miss Agate. "I am glad of it. I often fear Evelyn finds her life dull."

"I can't believe in anybody being dull with you," said Philip.

"Can't you?" she replied, with a laughing shake of the head. "You should hear Evelyn's side of the matter. Though she does not complain so much of me as of Mary Davies. And I do own Mary Davies is depressing. She would like to be always near Evelyn, shielding her from possible harm. When one has brought a child up, you see, one gets sometimes overfond of it."

"Which Evelyn naturally resents," observed Philip.

"Certainly," said Miss Agate. "But, as I say to Evelyn, why be cross with the poor, patient, faithful woman? as life goes on, one begins to find one is not troubled with too much love! Young people do not realize that. And Evelyn has been a little excited to-day. So have I, for that matter. And I dare say, if I tell you about it, you will laugh at us both for our pains."

"Then tell me, by all means," said Philip.
"Never deny a laugh to a fellow-creature."

"It is something I can show you," remarked

Miss Agate. Turning to her desk, she lifted up a printed paper, carefully folded, and handed it to Philip, pointing with her finger to a special paragraph.

It was the advertisement sheet of a London newspaper issued that morning. Philip Connell read :

"The 4th of September, 1835. Apply to Messrs. Dewe and Creed, Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn."

"Why! that was in our Hampshire paper of yesterday!" interposed Frank, in his surprise. "At least, the date was; I don't think there was any address. I noticed it because it happened to be the date of my birth."

Miss Agate was looking intently at Philip Connell.

"That is Evelyn's birthday, you know," she said, in a low voice.

"Is it?" said Philip, as if he did not feel pledged to remember every interesting fact about this girl. But he returned Miss Agate's gaze.

"And now your cousin says it was in the Hampshire paper, too," pleaded Miss Agate.

"Don't you remember what I told you about the paper in the baby's pocket?"

Philip appeared to be thinking.

"Could I make some inquiry?" she resumed in an undertone.

"You ought not to do so," said Philip quickly. "I might. But it may be like looking for a particular pebble on a shingly shore."

"I know that," she assented. "Yet it seems a chance. And I cannot bear to let one go by, for Evelyn's sake."

"She can never find a better friend than you, or a kinder home than this," spoke Philip emphatically.

"She might easily find a brighter and a richer one," returned Miss Agate in a gentle tone. "I think we ought to do something about this, Mr. Connell."

"I could go to Dewe and Creed, and pump them," Philip answered. "Bless me," he went on, as she began to thank him, "it is all in my line. Legal investigation—experience of life, and all that, you know; and what is more—it is good fun."

Miss Agate did not seem inclined to dwell

on the subject. She turned to her desk again, brought forward a magazine, and, apologizing to Frank for introducing professional business, straightway began to discuss some subject of mutual interest with Philip.

Frank caught the names of divers newspapers and periodicals, and such phrases, strange to him, as "proof" and "copy." He was glad to sip his tea and glance round the room. There certainly was not such a pretty room in Ravenscourt. The walls were studded with pictures, many of them fine engravings or photographs from great masterpieces. Hanging shelves were there, draped with red and set out with china, and it never struck Frank's innocent masculine mind as at all out of the common, when he noticed that this decorative pottery was exactly similar to that in use on the tea-table. Each chair was different from the other—different as their occupants could be; for they were of ebony and cane, and oak, and red and grey chintz, and stiff mahogany and pleasantly faded tent-stitch. There were books everywhere! Books in book-cases, books piled on

little tables, books on sets of tiny shelves fitted up beside the fireplace.

Frank's attention was suddenly recalled to his hostess by her exclaiming, her clear voice full of passionate intensity :

"Oh, if I could only find somebody who really believes in goodness and truth!"

"What could they have been talking about?" wondered the startled Frank. "And who did not believe in truth and goodness? One might have lived through a whole generation at Ravenstoke, and never heard such a cry of yearning."

Philip laughed. It was not a mocking laugh. Perhaps there was a little pain in it. But he only said, in his usual bantering way :

"If you talk to yourself when nobody is here, Miss Agate, as you have been talking to me, it is a great and grievous waste. Never say a word for nothing, which you could get well paid for writing down."

"I don't believe that even our unspoken thoughts are wasted," returned Miss Agate, though she drew a long breath before she answered. "I was thinking when I spoke

of God's wonderful lovingkindness to all His earthly flock and of His wisdom which works out His good will underneath all our folly ; and I do not believe there is one of us—no, not one, Mr. Connell—who adequately realizes these things, or can feel them as they deserve to be felt."

"Well, well," said Philip Connell, "we must each do the best we can, according to our lights, and though mine are dark enough, I might be better than I am, I freely admit. But I've brought you somebody after your own heart ; somebody who is dreadfully in earnest, Miss Agate. This cousin of mine has made up his mind that it is his duty to make his own way in the world, and he is determined to do nothing but what he thinks is right. Where do you think that will end ?"

"At the workhouse-door, possibly," said Miss Agate, quite cheerily, "but not probably. If you look in a beggar's face you will be generally able to remark, 'My friend, judging from your looks, I am thankful to see it is not your virtues which have brought you to this pass.'"

"And as a beginning," said Philip, disregarding the interpolation, "this young man has quarrelled with his own family, and, I may say, with his own bread-and-butter and jam."

"We have not quarrelled," put in Frank stoutly. "But we shall do better apart just now. They feel they could not help me without really hindering me. At least, I feel that. I am sure it is true. It is quite right. It is best."

"I understand," said Miss Agate kindly. But she said no more for a minute, and Frank's youthful pride took fire at the idea that some sort of silent appeal was made to her on his behalf.

"I shall do very well indeed," he said valiantly, with his heart sinking like lead within him. "A man can always help himself. Even his bodily strength counts for something. I can go to the backwoods and fell timber."

"Why need you go to the backwoods to do that?" asked the lady. "If you think your work lies in that line, why not do it here? A

man can make his way as well in England as in the colonies, if he will do here what he would have to do there."

"But he can't," stammered Frank, "because——" he was going to add, "he would be ashamed," but before the words were uttered it seemed as if Miss Agate's eyes showed him the depth of their meanness and cowardice.

"Why not?" she asked brightly. "A gentleman working among working men would be doing more towards the real progress of his race than a thousand elevating institutions. Remember, I say a gentleman. I don't mean a rich man whose bad habits have made him poor, and who degrades the honest class beneath him by taking refuge in it. Every year some poor man sets himself to grow rich because he appreciates luxury and power. Why should not gentlemen, who value simplicity and freedom from care, take up a workman's life?"

"But would it be doing the best we can with our talents?" asked Philip. "I thought you were always so strong on that point."

"Do men always go into professions to serve the professions? or because sometimes they think the professions may serve them?" asked Miss Agate.

"Oh dear," said Philip ruefully, "now I'm in for it. Is the law any better for my services? Oh dear no. Am I very much better off for belonging to the law? Oh dear no. But I live in hope, which springs eternal in the human breast."

"If I were younger," said Frank, hardly knowing what to make of either of them, "I should like to be an engineer."

"Ah, yes; and that might have suited admirably," admitted Philip. "Suppose you advertise as one, and get somebody else to do the work?"

"I hate advertisements," remarked Miss Agate, "they minister to the prevailing sins of self-announcement and self-praise."

"Can't get on without advertisements," said Philip. "We all advertise in our own way. The eye of the public must be caught."

"Catch it, then, by saying that one sells tea," said Miss Agate, "but leave others to

find out that it is the best and the cheapest of teas. But you are better than your own words, Mr. Connell."

"No, I'm not," Philip answered. "I know I don't go to all the philanthropic dinners, and defend—free, gratis, for nothing—all belligerent missionaries and charity-wardens. Young Rush does that, on my stair. But I don't abstain from this through principle, only because I can't be bothered. Don't think me better than I am!" he persisted, with half-ludicrous pathos.

Miss Agate had not seemed to heed his later sentences. She had sat silently, and whenever she sat so, there came upon her face a curious listening expression. Frank had noticed it more than once during the evening: he had even caught the infection, and listened too, and wondered what he expected to hear. The house was not profoundly quiet. Overhead, doors opened and shut, and voices were heard; but people do not listen for these ordinary sounds.

Frank had not sat long in that front parlour, before he had become aware that the back

room, divided from it by folding-doors, had an occupant of its own. He had heard a foot move to and fro—a heavy, slow foot, softly shod; a chair was drawn, and then came a sound as if a large volume was suddenly closed. It was the last of these sounds which brought that listening expression to Gertrude Agate's face. Just as Philip finished speaking, there was again the sound of a closing book, and then a musically-toned bell gave a tiny tinkle.

Miss Agate rose to her feet. Her guests rose, too; they were evidently dismissed.

She held out her hand to Frank, and her kind, eager eyes were fixed on him as she said:

"Do not fear life. Fear nothing but to do wrong. Never mind seeming to fail; when bubbles burst, they fall like dew. To do our best keeps us always busy; and then we can't be unhappy very long."

"We will come again, very soon, Miss Agate: as soon as I've seen these lawyers," said Philip. "And I'll bring Frank Raven with me."

The bell tinkled again. Miss Agate was

already fingering a key which hung from her girdle. And then Frank noticed that across the folding-doors leading to that back room was swung a bar with a lock in it. Nobody could enter that apartment hastily or unawares.

"Poor lady!" began Philip, when they were once more in the street, "there's a terrible story in that back room. She has never related it to me; I've gathered it up here and there. I'll not tell you about it—at any rate, not now. She can tell it to you herself if she wishes you to know: and I shouldn't be surprised if she does tell you, for I know Gertrude Agate, and if ever she took to a new face, she took to yours. She's a genius and a good woman, Frank—just a little cracked, perhaps—but through a crack, my boy, we may see a star, which may not shine in at the front door."

"I scarcely thought her cracked," said simple Frank. "All she said seemed so reasonable that I felt as if I ought to think with her. Only I fancy I had never thought at all about most of the subjects."

"Maybe she is extra wise," answered Philip, with a queer laugh. "But that comes to the same thing. Cracked china and crackle china look very much alike, only the one is too common, and the other is invaluable!"





CHAPTER VII.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

“**I** SUPPOSE I must go to these men, Dewe and Creed,” remarked Philip Connell, as he sat lazily sipping his coffee next morning.

“You mean about the mysterious advertisement?” rejoined Frank.

“Yes. If the errand was not for Miss Agate, I should say it was a fool’s mission; but she is the queerest woman I know for hitting on a right nail! I tell her she would have been burned in the witch days.”

“What is the particular nail to be hit in the present case—if I may ask?” said Frank.

“I did not understand it last night.”

"It is the mystery of Evelyn," Philip answered, melodramatically.

Frank laughed.

"I like mysteries. To begin with, who is Evelyn?"

"Evelyn is just Evelyn," said Philip. "She is very much just Evelyn and nothing else, though she is commonly called Evelyn Agate."

Frank looked puzzled.

"Who is she then?"

"That is what she does not know herself, and is particularly anxious to get explained," said Philip. "Neither do I know very much about her personally; except that she is what would be considered pretty by most people—including herself."

"Do explain, Philip!"

"Well, there is a mystery about the young lady's birth and parentage. I can never see how it can connect her with Miss Agate's own family tragedy: still I should think they are connected."

"The more you say, the more I am mystified, old fellow."

"You need not be," returned Philip. "You are quite welcome to know of Miss Evelyn what I know, Frank, and what she knows herself. She was left one evening at Miss Agate's door, without any clue to her identity."

"What a strange thing!"

"Hearing some prolonged noise outside, like a baby cooing, Miss Agate went to open the door, followed by her young servant—she was young then: twenty, or so—Mary Davies, who had also thought she heard sounds. There, on the doorstep, lay a pretty little girl-baby, a year old. Miss Agate took her in, and she and Mary brought her up between them—and I don't know which of the two women most loved the child. The name 'Evelyn' was marked in full with red marking-cotton on one of the little garments; nothing more. And that's all the history."

"Miss Agate seems to be a centre of romance."

"There's nothing like having a history of one's own to attract other histories," observed Philip. "All Gertrude Agate's friends have

histories. You never find commonplace people about her——”

“But about Miss Evelyn and her history, Philip?” interposed Frank, keeping him to the point.

“Really and truly I have told you all I know of it, Frank. Perhaps our interview with these lawyers may tell us more. You can go with me there.” And this settled, they went out together.

To Frank, the office of Messrs. Dewe and Creed seemed quite an imposing place—a labyrinth of passages, with little rooms opening upon them, and busy clerks flying about.

“They do a great deal of agency work,” Philip whispered to Frank, and Frank was as wise as before.

When Philip stated his mission of inquiry, a smart young clerk coolly observed that “this was some private matter: and they would have to wait to see one of the principals.” He went away, and returned, and, with an air of much greater civility, invited them to take seats in a tiny sanctum, furnished with hard chairs and a high desk.

They were not detained long. A tall thin gentleman, with grizzled grey hair, and an acute but not unkindly face, presently came in, and, announcing himself as Mr. Creed, said he was glad to see them, and ready to give them any information they required. Then he drew up a chair opposite, and sat down ; and straightway looked as communicative as the sphinx.

"Well," said Philip, with that easy non-chalance which was to Frank the very greatest wonder in wonderful London, "I will give you my card, as some sort of pledge of my *bonâ fides*. I would not send it in by the clerk."

Mr. Creed took it with a bow.

"A barrister, I presume," he said.

"Yes," replied Philip, "though a briefless one."

The solicitor looked up. Nobody but a rising man would be so outspoken. "Not long to remain such," he said, graciously.

And then Mr. Creed looked at Mr. Philip Connell, and Mr. Philip Connell looked at Mr. Creed. Questions would have to be

asked, and neither wished to ask the first, lest it might convey some information really more valuable than the answer to be received.

"Though I am a barrister," began Philip Connell, "you must view me in this matter only as a private gentleman ; a clergyman, say, or a family doctor. In short, anybody with a trained discretion and a sense of honour might have been asked to do the duty I am now discharging."

The solicitor bowed. "I understand," he said.

"You had an advertisement in yesterday's papers," commenced Philip. That was a perfectly safe observation, while absolute silence was growing awkward.

"We had," said Mr. Creed, quite at his ease so far.

"Also in a Hampshire paper of the day before?" Philip remarked.

"We had," said Mr. Creed again ; but with a perceptible guarding of face, which reminded Frank forcibly of the innocent hypocrisies of the childish game of "hide and seek."

"May I ask what is the significance of that advertisement?" inquired Philip, as airily as if he quite expected a frank answer.

"May I ask what reason you have for being interested therein?" returned Mr. Creed.

"I am entrusted to make this inquiry by a person who has reason to attach a very deep significance to the date mentioned in your advertisement," said Philip. "I presume that the date is the date of an occurrence."

Mr. Creed bowed. "Doubtless the date of many occurrences," he said with a smile.

At this moment the door of the room was opened, and shut again so quickly that neither Philip nor Frank saw who it was that had looked in.

"But I presume," pursued Philip, "that you announce that date in hopes of eliciting a response from some one or other to whom it bears a special meaning."

"That is the natural inference," avowed Mr. Creed.

The door was opened again ; this time by

the dapper clerk. He announced that Mr. Dewe wished to speak with his partner for a moment.

Mr. Creed apologized and withdrew. He was absent fully five minutes; and when he came back he looked sharply at Frank. That is to say, he looked at him, for all Mr. Creed's looks were sharp.

"Am I asking too much if I inquire whether this date has any special significance in the county of Hampshire?" resumed Philip.

"Hampshire!" said Mr. Creed, rather tartly, "what makes you think of Hampshire?"

"Because your advertisement was put in a Hampshire paper."

"Oh," said Mr. Creed, quite sweetly. "Perhaps a Hampshire paper is the only country paper of that date you happen to know about."

"The date is so significant," said Philip, "that—my friend—thought it worth while to follow up the advertisement in the London papers, *before* knowing of that in the Hamp-

shire paper. When known, it considerably strengthened the clue."

Mr. Creed bowed again. "Of course, you pardon my reserve," he said. "I have to study the interests of my clients."

"Certainly," assented Philip: "and, at the same time, I am zealous in the cause of my friend."

"This gentleman, I presume?" said Mr. Creed, with another bow in the direction of Frank.

"Oh dear no," Philip answered. The exclamation began with a genuine ring of disclaimer, but the final negative fell rather faintly. The young barrister had been off his guard for a second, but recovered himself immediately. Why need he deny so strenuously if the solicitor chose to take up a wrong scent? But Philip was reckoning without Frank.

"Oh no," struck in Frank candidly. "It has nothing to do with me, except that it happens also to be the date of my own birth—which made me notice it in the newspaper I brought away with me when I left Ravenstoke yesterday. But this is not my affair at all."

The lawyer bent forward, and was listening to Frank with encouraging interest. Philip gave a sudden tilt to his chair, which brought its leg sharply down on the floor, as if to put a full stop to Frank's communicativeness. A pause ensued.

"Do you think your friend would have any objection to give me a personal call?" asked the lawyer suavely.

"I should not like to advise it," said Philip, "unless you give me some solid ground to work upon."

"Well," said Mr. Creed slowly, and toying between every word with a paper-knife, as if the revelation were a subject for painful consideration, "well—I think—I may say—this much: It is the case of—a missing child. The matter concerns—the happiness and well-being—of a wealthy and honourable family—and I can give no detail until I receive details which justify me in thinking we are moving in the right direction. Total disappointment and failure will be preferred to—to any mistake. If those to whom this date and this advertisement can possibly

mean anything do not think it worth while to state their own case, I am instructed that my clients will not say the first word."

"Now we know where we are," cried Philip. "Well, as I can make my story clear to you without mentioning names, as, indeed, names are its great want—perhaps it is fair that I should be the frankest. Then, in my story, this date is ascribed to the birth of a certain person."

Mr. Creed gave a gesture of entire attention.

"It is almost all that is known of the birth," Philip went on. "The words, 'Born on the 4th September, 1835,' were written on a piece of paper and pinned to the clothes of a little child, who was left on a certain doorstep in the autumn of 1836."

"The child would then be a year old."

"Precisely so."

"And the child was——?" continued Mr. Creed, and paused with a note of interrogation.

"A pretty little girl," answered Philip.

"Taken to the workhouse, I suppose?"

said the solicitor, looking towards the window.

"No," Philip replied, "she was taken in by the family on whose doorstep she was left."

The lawyer was now listening with unfeigned attention.

"A very unusual act of charity," he observed. "Was there no clue whatever to the identity of this foundling girl?"

"None," said Philip emphatically. "She was nicely dressed, and on one of the garments she wore was marked the Christian name Evelyn: nothing more. But in the child's frock there was a pocket, and in it were a few pieces of paper, which the little thing seemed to have played at tearing up, and which had probably not been noticed or remembered. Of course they were pieced together, with the utterly unsatisfactory result of producing the word 'Hampshire,' and the solitary letter 'h.' The finding of the child was announced in the papers, but nothing came of that. You see a child is something one can't drop accidentally—

so its loser is little likely to want to find it again."

"And in what class of life has the girl been reared?" asked Mr. Creed.

"She has received the education of a lady, and has lived under the supervision of one," replied Philip.

"And does she look one? Has she the marks of good breeding?"

"She has a graceful figure and small hands and feet," Philip answered cautiously. "She would be considered a pretty girl," he added, after a moment's pause.

"Well, well," said Mr. Creed, "so far there is a great deal which I think must be worthy of my client's attention; but I feel quite sure I must have a personal interview with the young lady. There may be one or two little points of family resemblance, and—and so on. Can she not come here, accompanied by some friend of her own? Let her appoint her own time—not earlier than the day after to-morrow."

"I dare say it could be arranged," said Philip.

“Then you will write to me, stating whether she will consent to an appointment—and, if so, when it is to be?” said Mr. Creed, rising, and thus intimating that the interview was at an end. “I am deeply indebted to you for your frankness, and I am sure you must understand and respect my reserve,” he continued. “You see your client can easily remain nameless, as long as she chooses. As regards her identity, I am no wiser now than when I first spoke to you.” Philip nodded assent. “With my client it is different. The least disclosure might give a clue; which clue, if followed up, might lead to the disastrous and heartbreaking result of pretenders and impostures. If we lawyers always knew our business, Mr. Connell, we might do more work in our offices, and have fewer *causes célèbres* in our courts.”

Mr. Creed saw them to the end of the passage. But as he turned to Mr. Dewe’s private room his face was grave and thoughtful.

“I’ve taken your hint, Creed,” said Dewe; “the advertisement is already off to other

county papers. It would never do to give a clue to Hampshire. I wonder we did not see that before !”

“We are not used to this sort of work,” observed Mr. Creed, rather grimly.

“Who could expect that youngster would be the first to walk into the office, asking questions !” retorted Dewe. “What a blessing he was pointed out to me at Ravenstoke, so that I knew him by sight ! I recognised him the moment I opened the door of your room. And a good thing I looked into it when I did !—and had you called out to put you on your guard.”

“I was on my guard before,” growled Mr. Creed, who was not too well pleased with the business on hand.

“I say, Creed, that youngster evidently smells a rat !”

“Well,” assented Mr. Creed, shaking his head, “it is hard to fancy he came here out of mere chance. And yet the barrister has told me a feasible story : and they are going, I believe, to send a girl to see me. But—as for that young Raven, he looked most entirely

unconcerned, as if the business had nothing to do with him. Either he does not suspect anything at all, or he is the very best actor on or off any stage."

"Really I did think you two would never come to any understanding, Philip!" exclaimed Frank, as they walked away from the interview. "Why could not you tell your story straight off? What harm would have been in it? As the man says, he is no nearer knowing anything about Evelyn Agate now."

"One can never tell," said Philip. "Besides, he is a solicitor, and I am a barrister, and, unless I can bamboozle him a little, he would never trust me to bamboozle anybody else—never give me a brief. I don't believe I did it half well enough. My conscience is reproaching me that I was a great deal too soft. And who asked you to tell him about your birthday?"

"Why, it came out naturally," answered Frank. "That could not signify anyway."

"Well, then, don't burden the world with useless facts, and don't throw away useful ones," retorted Philip. "And now for home,

that I may write a letter to Gertrude Agate, and tell her all I have done in her cause, and that if she chooses to take Evelyn to see Mr. Creed, she can write to me and name her hour, and I will accompany her."

"It was very good of her to take in the poor little baby."

"Ah, there was an empty place awaiting it! And my firm belief is, that those who left it there knew that," added Philip.

"Is Miss Agate well off?" asked Frank, quite at sea among the new ways of life into which he was being introduced.

"Yes, and no," was the reply. "She has nothing but what she earns, but then she buys nothing but what she wants, does nothing but what she chooses, and consequently finds her expenditure considerably within her income."

"I suppose she works a great deal with her pen?" said Frank with grave reverence.

"Yes," nodded Philip. "Yet she has much leisure. What she does comes easily off her pen, though I won't say it may have gone very easily into her heart. She uses a red

ink, which is fearfully expensive, though it makes a clear and striking manuscript. You may be wanting some yourself soon, Frank. For it is used for other purposes than writing. It is only life-blood."

Frank felt what his cousin meant, though he was not accustomed to speech in metaphor. "Don't you mean to go and see her this evening—as you half promised?" said he, to change the subject.

"No. I'll write, and she won't let the grass grow under her feet; we shall have an answer from her to-night, appointing a time to go to the lawyers'. You see I have literally nothing to tell her."

Philip was right. The two young men were once more smoking their evening cigars when the last post brought a letter from Miss Agate, in reply to Philip's hasty note.

"She's an aggravating woman!" he cried, as he tossed it to Frank. "Is it not too bad? I told her there was no need for these lawyers to know her name or address: even if she chose to write to them herself,

instead of letting me do so. Just see what she says!"

"DEAR MR. CONNELL,

"Many thanks for your great promptitude and for the kind offer of your escort. But why should we trouble you further? Evelyn and I will go to Portugal Street at noon on Saturday. I have written to Mr. Creed to say so. There is no necessity for any secrecy on our side, so I bade him address to me here, if our appointment was inconvenient to him. And I signed myself, as I do now,

"Yours faithfully,

"GERTRUDE AGATE."

"I think that is a very sensible and straightforward thing for Miss Agate to have done," cried Frank. "I can't understand beating about the bush for no object."

"Object!" echoed Philip. "Why, it is like playing at whist with a partner who sees no 'object' in not showing her cards! Besides, Miss Agate ought to have seen

a reason for not proclaiming her name !
Look at the undue advantage it gives Creed !
Of course, he will know everything at
once !”

“What is there to know ?”

Philip looked at the questioner. “Does
the name of Agate suggest nothing to you,
Frank ?”

“Nothing at all. Except that it is a
singular name.”

“You are not much over twenty,” returned
Philip. “Of course, you did not read news-
papers in your cradle. Neither did I, for
that matter. But since then my reading,
as a lawyer, has lain among old cases,
precedents, and so forth. So, I presume, has
Mr. Creed’s. Therefore, he will recognise
the name of Agate ; may go down to the
Detective Department at Scotland Yard, and
ask if the name is known there. I don’t
suppose the staff are entirely changed, even
in the course of twenty years. Though, if so,
they won’t have allowed a standing reward of
five hundred pounds to slip from their books
even in that time.”

"Why, what are you talking of, Philip?"

"She is an aggravating woman!" was all Philip reiterated. "Her extraordinary frankness will only make Creed think there is some very cunning cheater about the whole affair. Never can I get her to understand that, if you honestly wish people to believe the truth, you generally have to tell them a lie. The world is taught on its very copybooks that 'appearances are deceitful.' When I am at my wits' end to get more credit, I always tell my tradesmen I'm very hard up. They think I'd never say so if it was true!"

"Well, all I can say is, that I am glad to have met Miss Agate; or I might think London morals as hazy as London streets."

And there rose up in Frank's mind a picture of the broad fields at Ravenstoke, with the pale light dying on the edge of the horizon, and the great trees closing up round the old hall, and the maid-servants stealing across the lawn to have a gossip in the village, while the footman drew the curtains of the drawing-room and shut in the lamp-light. His mother would be sipping her tea;

Leonard wandering about the room glancing at newspapers and dipping into books.

Frank could never have imagined that at that moment Leonard handed his mother a telegram, just delivered to him ; and that she read it with half-blinded eyes and a reeling brain.

"From Messrs. Dewe and Creed, London, to Leonard Raven, Esq.—Two ladies are coming to our office at noon on Saturday in response to advertisement. Report promising. Telegraph instructions."

"Leonard, Leonard," said his mother, seizing both her son's hands and clinging to him, "I must go up to London."

"You will only compromise yourself in some way, mother," dissented Leonard. "Better wait and see what they find out."

"Tell them, the solicitors, to take care I don't compromise myself—lawyers can always do that," gasped Mrs. Raven. "But oh, Leonard, I cannot sit here waiting. It might be a saving of doubt and trouble if I were on the spot. I am not rash, Leonard. See ! I am calm ; quite calm."

Her son looked at her doubtfully, and spoke unwillingly.

"Well, mother, I suppose you must do as you will."

And then Mrs. Raven went upstairs to her own chamber, and stood there in the dark, looking out at the moonbeams sleeping on the heavily laden branches—the same moonbeams that stole into Frank's City bedroom.

If poor Frank had dreamed of such things in his troubled slumbers he would, on awaking, have only sighed, "How wild dreams are!"





CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE LAWYERS' OFFICE.

ON Friday night James Sloam, the page, took down orders that the little basket-chaise was to be ready early next morning to drive Mrs. Raven to the railway station.

She came downstairs, muffled in her fur cloak and widow's veil. Leonard did not rise to see her off. Little attentions had never been in his line : moreover, he did not altogether approve of the expedition. To take his breakfast frequently in bed was but a result of his sickly boyhood.

Mrs. Raven took her drive in silence. James Sloam, a good-humoured, country-looking lad, saw nothing significant in that.

Mrs. Raven seldom spoke to her under-servants, unless to complain.

On the platform they found Charity Hale. She was to travel by the same train as Mrs. Raven, but only as far as the market town, Standchester. It was one of Charity Hale's duties, though neither cook nor housekeeper, but simply the upper servant of all, to cater weekly for such commodities as the Home Farm did not furnish.

Mrs. Raven gave a start when she saw Charity, angrily wondering what brought her there ; but the next minute recalled the fact that she was only where she ought to be, on that day and at that hour. Still, her présence brought uneasiness. From her carriage window Mrs. Raven watched her talking to James Sloam, before the train moved off. And at Standchester she watched again to see Charity alight from her third-class carriage : and when the woman was lost amidst the crowd on the platform she felt more at ease. Mrs. Raven was in that nervous and shaken condition when fear attaches itself quite unreasonably to everything. The train waited

here ten minutes. It was about to start on again, when another passenger appeared in great haste, and was put in the carriage behind Mrs. Raven's.

This was a tall woman, wearing the dark dress, mantle, and ample veil which generally indicate a nursing sister or a member of some other benevolent association. Mrs. Raven wondered idly who she was—whether there had been illness anywhere in the neighbourhood, and this was somebody who had been engaged to tend the case, or whether she was some person connected with the new vicar of Charl, who was reported to be so very High Church.

At the London terminus Mrs. Raven called a cab, and gave the driver the address of the office to which she was bound. She never noticed the tall woman, who moved unobtrusively among the hubbub. She also called a cab and gave her directions ; and the cab followed that of Mrs. Raven.

Mrs. Raven found both the lawyers in attendance to receive her—this lady, whose case had been put before them by her son,

with many hints and reservations which puzzled them exceedingly. So darkly, indeed, had her requirements been stated by Leonard, that much of Mr. Creed's cautiousness in his interview with Philip Connell was entirely assumed—his secret being that safest of all secrets, one unknown to himself.

As Philip suspected, the signature and address of Miss Agate's note had given the lawyers a certain clue to the past, which undoubtedly did not lessen their interest in the present case. They were genuinely attentive. Even solicitors are but men. These two had known family histories, and had had mysteries laid plainly before them, which they could survey and grasp. But here they had a mystery that was still mysterious—a new chapter in an old story which had thrilled society more than twenty years ago—another act cropping up in a strange drama—a new clause in an unsolved riddle.

Mr. Creed, the older man, though his name stood last, disliked all business but conveyancing ; yet, from the time of Miss Agate's note, he almost forgave Mr. Dewe for his

tendency to dive into what he, in his older and steadier mind, generally called "dirty byways."

"You are very punctual, madam," the elder lawyer said to Mrs. Raven. "Probably the ladies who are coming will not keep us long waiting. Will you care to see the note we received from them? Then you will be in possession of all the facts we have ourselves."

The two partners had agreed that this letter should be shown. Mr. Creed watched Mrs. Raven as she read it. He thought her face grew a little paler. But he was not sure; it was so pale already.

"Do you remember the name of Agate?" he asked, very quietly. And there was no mistake that she started at the question.

"Yes—no. I—I think I have heard it before," she answered.

"Probably," said Mr. Creed. "So have we. So I think have most people who have lived to our age."

"I remembered it directly I saw it," interrupted the younger man, Dewe; "and we

referred to an old newspaper to verify facts. It is almost impossible that both name and address can be mere coincidences. This Miss Agate must be of that same family."

The widow sat with open eyes and parted lips.

"Perhaps, madam, your memory does not serve you," observed Mr. Creed. "The facts were these: In the autumn of eighteen hundred and thirty-five a family of the name of Agate, living in the house whence this Miss Agate now writes, lost an infant child. It was kidnapped on the very day of its birth, presumably by the woman who had acted as nurse, since she disappeared at the same time, and could never be traced. Large rewards were offered for the child's recovery. All England rang with the story."

"I don't remember hearing of this at all," spoke Mrs. Raven, gathering what courage she could. "I do not read the papers much at any time, and I was ill at that date."

Before her mind rose up a vision of those far-back days, when she had lain in the

hushed state-chamber at Raven, with Frank upon her arm. She could see the Squire steal in, on tiptoe. She could hear Charity's thin voice eagerly declaring that the dear lady had done justice to the old stock at last, and that the babe was no weakling this time, but a bonny boy. She could see herself, at hearing those words, turn upon her pillow, weeping bitter tears, and crushing and clutching the dainty sheets in her feeble hands. No! it was not likely she had read the newspaper.

"You may be sure that such an incident had terrible effects on the bereaved family," said Mr. Creed. "It was soon followed by a sad tragedy: But I need not go into that. It really had nothing to do with the boy who had been lost—or with the girl, either, who was found, almost exactly one year afterwards."

Mrs. Raven looked at him eagerly. "A girl was found!"

"Yes; left on the doorstep. She is coming here with Miss Agate to-day."

"Can I see these ladies when they come

—without their knowing it? It is not desirable that they should see me.”

“Certainly it is not,” said Mr. Dewe.
• “We can arrange all that. You may see them through this little window. Pray observe that the clear stars on the ground glass give a command of the next room without revealing anybody who may happen to be on this side. It is really a very handy arrangement.”

“Though I’m sure we never thought of such a use for it before,” interposed his partner.

“Is there any special question you would like put to these people, madam?” resumed Mr. Dewe.

“Oh dear no,” said Mrs. Raven, with a strange shrinking; and the observant solicitors thought she had seemed oddly timid and mistrustful since the mention of the Agates. “Yet I think I should like to ask about the mother of this boy, who, as you say, was kidnapped,” she added, as an afterthought. “Yes, and about the nurse: she who was suspected of kidnapping him.”

Mr. Creed assented, and made one or two notes.

"I wish I could hear the answers myself," observed Mrs. Raven, with a suppressed eagerness of manner. "I suppose that is quite impossible."

"I don't think so," said Mr. Dewe. "That starred window opens at the top, and if we draw it down a little, you will hear the voices well."

"And you might ask if the father of the missing boy is still living," continued Mrs. Raven, in the most commonplace manner, though she thought her breath would never hold out during those few words.

"We can ask that, too," said Mr. Creed. "And now, madam, there is something else I must tell you. It may mean nothing at all. I only mention it because I do not choose to conceal aught from you, nor to penetrate into your confidence further than you desire. You remember I wrote you word that it was a gentleman who came here on behalf of this Miss Agate. He was accompanied by your second son, Mr. Frank Raven."

The widow's pale face turned perceptibly paler this time. Something like a spasm contracted her thin lips. Her voice shook as she spoke. "Who was the other gentleman?"

"A Mr. Philip Connell, a young barrister—a very clever young man, I should fancy," said the solicitor. "He came here as an old friend of Miss Agate's, empowered by her to make inquiries."

"Oh—that is my nephew—my husband's nephew," said Mrs. Raven; "Frank is staying with him. Was my son interested in this matter?"

"It is impossible to say," replied Mr. Creed. "The only remark he made during the interview was, that he had casually noticed our advertisement in the Hampshire paper because the date it named was that of his own birth. Mr. Dewe looked into the room accidentally, and recognised him from having seen him in the village when he waited on you at Ravenscourt."

"Did Frank see Mr. Dewe?" asked the widow, rather quickly.



"No," said Mr. Dewe, speaking for himself. "I am quite sure he did not. I do not suppose he has ever seen me."

"I am glad of that," observed Mrs. Raven, speaking with great deliberation. "It is not necessary that he should know anything of this affair. He is but young yet, and rather flighty, and if he knew anything he would have to know all, and it might make him look upon some things in an unwholesome light. My eldest son and I came to that conclusion."

"Of course we kept you and your instructions entirely out of sight," said Mr. Creed. "They——"

He was interrupted. A clerk handed in a card to him.

"Here are the ladies," said the lawyer, in a lowered tone. "Now, Mrs. Raven, if anything arises during our interview on which you want further information, touch that hand-bell, and I will wait upon you."

Mrs. Raven took up her station at the window between the rooms, and watched the two strangers as they entered the other one.

It did not strike her she was doing a dishonourable thing. She was sinning on the line that she had sinned through her whole life ; and never, until that vein of sinfulness is nearing its end, do we detect its darkness. So little was she accustomed to regard her actions in relation to anybody but herself, that she did not even see the significance of Mr. Creed's words, as he took a chair opposite the Agates.

"I must ask you to remember," he began, speaking to Miss Agate, "that I am bound to report every word you say to my client. I mean that I wish you to understand that no statement you make to me can be regarded as in any way confidential."

"I comprehend," answered Gertrude Agate, in her bell-like tones. "I am afraid we have only too little statement to make. I believe Mr. Connell has already told you the few and simple details of the finding of my adopted niece, this young lady, on my door-step, with the record pinned to her clothes : ' Born the 4th of September, 1835 ' ?"

"He has done so," said Mr. Creed, with a

polite bow, and a glance in the direction of the young lady. "Still there remain a few questions which have occurred to me. And you must pardon me if these relate somewhat to your own family history. Your name," added the lawyer, "recalled to my mind the sad story of the little stolen babe who, more than twenty years ago, was taken from the very house whence you dated your note to me. I presume, therefore, that baby boy was some relation of yours."

"He is my nephew," said Gertrude Agate quickly. In her mind she had always kept that child in the present tense.

"Naturally, the story of the child which you lost, and of the child which you found, connect themselves in one's mind."

"Certainly," Gertrude Agate answered frankly, "I can never separate the two. I absolutely hope they are connected. It gives a double chance to the solution of the mystery."

As the lawyer turned over his papers he glanced again at the young lady, who, in spite of her elaborate braids and her aristo-

cratic tournure, did not impress him nearly so much either with breed or possible beauty as did her little eager-eyed, dark-haired friend.

"Well, madam, I must ask—pardon me for it—whether your brother, the lost child's father, is still living?" inquired Mr. Creed.

"Yes," answered Gertrude Agate, with a checked sigh.

"I remember all the circumstances of the case," spoke the lawyer, quite sympathetically. "Everybody's pity went with him. May I inquire whether he is still in confinement?"

"He is at home with me," she answered, with a sad simplicity.

"But he lives quite shut up," put in the younger lady, Evelyn Agate. "He has never even seen me."

"May I also ask what was the maiden name of the poor lady, his wife?" continued Mr. Creed.

"Marion Snow," shortly replied Miss Agate. "An orphan. Ah, she was a sweet girl when my brother married her: good,

gentle, lady-like, accomplished. I never thought he loved her half enough, and yet he loved her very truly, and was a good and tender husband—till the terrible end came.”

“I find the monthly nurse was suspected of the baby’s abduction,” Mr. Creed went on. “You see, Miss Agate, I have been refreshing my memory with the details from an ancient newspaper. Do you remember anything about this woman?—But you must have been very young at that time.”

“I was sixteen,” replied Gertrude Agate; “I am eight-and-thirty now. I remember her perfectly. I am quite sure it was she who took away the poor baby—only three hours after his birth. Every trace of her also vanished. My dear sister-in-law had hired her accidentally, and we could never find out where she had lived. I am certain I should know her if I saw her. I kept her image in my eyes and in my mind from that day, and have watched for her in the streets. She was a tall woman, with black eyes, and when she spoke she made long pauses between the sentences. I did not like her from the

first, and her manner to me was rude and strange."

"What was the baby like?" asked Mr. Creed.

Gertrude Agate shook her head.

"He seemed to be fair," she said; "but you cannot tell at that early age, and he may have turned out dark later. He was a bonnie bairn, and I would give all I have to find him now."

"Well, it was very kind of you to take in the foundling girl in his stead, and I'm sure she has done you credit," said Mr. Creed, inwardly adding, "Heaven forgive me for telling a fib."

"Yes, it was very kind," interrupted Evelyn Agate; "but I may have lost something by the exchange, and that boy has got it! Perhaps something that a girl could not inherit? And that's such a shame, for women want money more than men! He could have been a doctor—or a lawyer—or anything. But I can be only——"

"Only what?" asked Mr. Creed, as she hesitated.

"A lady's companion. It is what we have thought of—what I should like well enough."

"And I'm sure you ought to find that position delightful."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the young lady, whom Mr. Creed mentally recorded as "the young person." "I want to see a somewhat different life, and I am looking out for an appointment: and I could not help hoping this might lead to some disclosure about me—and give her dear nephew back to Aunt Gertrude."

"Well," said Mr. Creed, rising, "I will write you a line, madam, as soon as I have seen my client. All that you have told me conveys nothing to me personally, but it shall be reported. Good-morning."

He hastened to Mrs. Raven. Her face was deadly white, and she had bitten her under lip until it had turned a bright vermillion: she had put on her gloves as if quite ready to depart.

"You never asked what had become of the stolen boy's mother," she began, almost accusingly.

"My dear madam," exclaimed Mr. Creed, "I knew that. That was the most awful end of the tragedy. Directly after that baby was stolen, the husband, Theodore Agate, who had been already overtasking himself with severe brain work, suddenly fell into a state of acute mania. In this terrible condition he rushed into the presence of his poor wife, and would have attacked her. That was prevented, but the shock killed her. The unhappy gentleman was confined for a while, and then he was given up to the care of his relatives. I could let you have an old newspaper with the whole story."

Mrs. Raven paced the little apartment.

"It is all no use," she said, "it will not do. I am frightened. It is not right that I should stir in this pursuit. Write to these people, please, and tell them your client has nothing to do with their matters: it was a mistake. Put a stop at once to anything more at present. Perhaps I may write again to you."

"It shall be exactly as you wish, madam," remarked Mr. Creed rather coldly, as he

showed her out of the room and downstairs, placing the newspaper beside her in the cab.

She never even remembered to bid him a civil good morning. Therefore she was in no condition to observe that the nunlike woman she had noticed on the Standchester platform was now quietly seated in a confectioner's shop at the corner of the street.

"Well," said Mr. Creed to his partner, "I never did like this class of work—never!"

"Glorious lawsuits begin thus, though," returned the other.

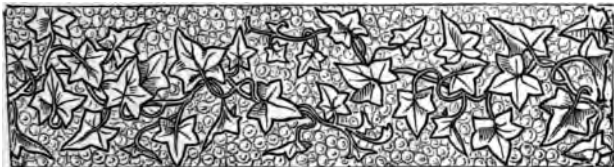
"Glorious stirrings up of mud," retorted Mr. Creed, "and the dirt is sure to splash in the wrong faces! Fancy my making that dear little woman open up all the old history of her household skeleton for nothing! And what is the meaning of Mrs. Raven's present queer start? Did she have an hallucination when she began this quest?—or now when she has ended it?—or, as her son thinks, at the time she says it happened? Her bill shall be a pretty stiff one. I was afraid of some such work when we were to be called

in for a special case that wasn't to go to the family solicitors. 'I wish you would be more careful, Dewe !'

And away, back to Ravenstoke, went Mrs. Raven of the Court, with only an old newspaper in her hand : but it seemed to her as if the porter's cries, nay, the very wheels of the train, repeated four words she had read therein :

" The madman, Theodore Agate !"





CHAPTER IX.

THE HISTORY OF THE AGATES.

IN that same Saturday evening Philip Connell and Frank set off to call on Miss Agate, to ask what she had done with the lawyers.

They found the clean, threadbare house the same as usual, but this time the two ladies were at home. Evelyn was in high spirits, and very gracious in manner when Frank was introduced to her. She was glad she had not seen him before. Here was one human being whose first impression of her would not be of a deserted child, but of a mysterious foundling.

"I am certain something will come of it," she said, interrupting Gertrude's narrative. "I felt sure of it from the lawyer's manner.

He was so respectful to me. I noticed two or three strong-boxes with titled names on them as we were led through the office : Dewe and Creed must be a first-rate firm. Nobody without considerable means would employ them to make inquiries."

Her thoughts were of the rank and wealth that might possibly be within her grasp : she seemed to have no recollection of the sufferings and sins which must certainly have underlain her mysterious history, nor any longing for the kindred love of which she had been so long deprived.

"I don't like to see Evelyn too hopeful," said Miss Agate gravely. "I want her to remember that, at the very last, the lawyer said all we had told him conveyed nothing to him personally, but that it should be faithfully reported."

"People don't choose all their words with an eye direct to truth," answered Evelyn. "There are certain conventional phrases which come in handily on occasions, and mean little or nothing : and I believe that was one."

"Heyday, young lady!" cried Philip, "where did you get so much knowledge of the world?"

"I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance for a long time, sir," she retorted, with an arch curtesy.

She was certainly a handsome young woman, with her regular features, clear complexion, and rich chestnut hair. She was well-dressed too, in a fashionably cut velvet robe, with stiff frills at the throat and wrists. And yet, as Frank looked at her, a strange expression of disfavour crept across his face. Her very beauty and elegance only reminded him of the barmaid at the luncheon-rooms which Philip Connell frequented, whose pert familiarity had been very objectionable to one like him accustomed to the kindly respectfulness of the Raven maid-servants. The veneer might be a little thicker and smoother in Evelyn's case, but surely beneath lay the same coarse-grained nature, with all its vulgar self-appraisement and greed and falsity. Frank did not think these things: he only felt them—only reflected how different this

girl was from that other girl he had met in the Ravenstoke lanes. It was one of the blessings of his simple nature that it had acute instincts.

"You might all leave me my hopes for a day or two, at any rate," she said, pouting. "Just because my sun seems peeping out, the clouds about me must begin to rain! Even our abigail, Mrs. Davies, has passed the day in a state of damp distress: which I am asked to believe arises solely from her fear of losing me! I believe she is always miserable, and is only glad of any excuse for letting it out."

"When you know poor Mary is so nervous and weak-minded," said Miss Agate, "you should have told her nothing till you were sure there was something to tell."

"Dear me," cried Evelyn, "I thought it was a good opportunity for letting her exercise her powers of dreams and signs and omens. And I was right, too: she began directly we got in from the lawyers' office, telling me she must have fallen asleep over the kitchen fire, for she had had a dream."

"Did she relate it?" asked Philip.

"Oh yes," said Evelyn: "it ran that my people were discovered, and that, after all, nobody really belonged to me but my mother, and she was only a poor woman. And she said she distinctly saw me and my mother standing in front of each other in the dream, just as she and I were standing at that moment, and in her eagerness to see how I would act and behave, she awoke."

"Poor Mary Davies!" cried Miss Agate, "she has always been very fond of Evelyn. She was with me, you see, when I opened the door and found the baby on the step: we found her, as may be said, together. I never shall forget the state of excitement she went into: it was her way. And when once I had made up my mind to adopt the little girl, she seemed to think that, as our own child had been stolen from our house already, there might be danger for this one, and so mounted guard over it most assiduously. No wonder she has grown fond of Evelyn, and anxious almost to a mania for her welfare!"

"Ah, she is a faithful old retainer," re-

marked Philip carelessly, the subject not much interesting him. "Was she with you at the time of your great trial?"

"No; not for some months after that. I had been inquiring at the shops for a young servant, and she presented herself. A timid, feckless thing, she seemed, poor and friendless, who would be glad to do anything for a bit of bread."

"Like many another London girl," put in Evelyn disdainfully.

"She was a country lass," said Miss Agate. "I caught up an impression that she had been in some trouble or sorrow in her country birth-place, and had come away to London out of it. She came from Alstock, in Surrey."

"That's not far from Ravenstoke," observed Frank, "though it's in another county."

"Did you never hear her history?" asked Philip.

"Never," said Miss Agate. "And I have grown to doubt whether she has any history to tell. I do not find enough employment for her myself, but the other people in the house

do, and so—here she has stayed. She has never, to my knowledge, received a visitor or a letter all these twenty years. Nor has she ever taken a holiday.”

“She looks merely a decent, doleful, affectionate, commonplace woman,” observed Philip.

“Exactly so,” said Miss Agate, “and I have found her invaluable. My poor brother’s peculiar condition demands that I have some very faithful, obedient ally—inclined to submission and silence. The lodgers like her, too: and some of them have been here many years. I have had to let my rooms, you know, to eke out my small income.”

The confidences demanded by her morning interview with the lawyers seemed to have broken down Miss Agate’s accustomed reserve. Never before had Philip Connell heard her allude directly to the skeleton in her home—her brother.

“Does Mr. Agate really see nobody?” he asked, genuine sympathy mingling with his curiosity, “or is an exception made in favour of Mary Davies?”

"He sees literally nobody but me," said Miss Agate, with sad serenity. "I do all the work in his room, and take him the meals which Davies brings to his door. I don't think he is unhappy. These are habits he formed directly he was released from confinement."

"But how can he endure the awful monotony?" cried Philip.

"He seems quite absorbed in his classic authors," returned Miss Agate. "They are always the delight of his life. He writes well, too, and editors are glad of anything from his pen. I have made his room very bright and pretty," she continued, after a pause. "It has a long window opening on the garden, and I have had a strip walled off for his especial use. In summer-time, when the leaves are thick, he walks up and down there for hours. Poor Theodore's mind has entirely returned to him—not quite the same, perhaps, but changed somewhat, as a person's constitution is often said to be changed after recovery from a high fever. He is not even eccentric in any little detail. He has

not a single hallucination. Singularly excitable as his nerves are, so that the least sound or movement irritates them, he never imagines aught which does not exist. He could not bear anything now but perfect solitude. He dreads the sight of the outer world."

"I don't see what is the use of talking over these things," remarked Evelyn coldly. "I have always admired your wisdom, Aunt Gertrude, for burying them in silence."

"There is no use," admitted Miss Agate, "only, having had to discuss them with strangers to-day, makes it seem natural, I suppose, to speak of them with friends—unless indeed I weary you?" she added quickly, with ready self-rebuke.

"Weary us! No, indeed you do not," said Philip warmly. "What a sad fate that poor young wife's was!"

"Ay," sighed Miss Agate, "dear Marian Snow! If ever, as I have but now told you, there was a good sweet woman, she was one. I never thought my brother Theodore loved her half enough. And yet he could have

married her for nothing but pure love. For she had no money, nor any family connections. She was only a governess. She adored Theodore. I used to say she spoiled him. And she was ever kind to me, and did me a great deal of good."

"She must not have had too bright a life from the beginning, being an orphan," remarked Philip.

"I dare say not," said Miss Agate. "But the lady who adopted her was good to her. Marian had never known her parents, but she thought much of them: she used to say she had ever tried to be good, so that when they should meet her in the next world they should have nothing to reproach her with."

"How good that was!" cried Frank involuntarily.

"Grand philosophy!" assented Philip, in his really genial spirit, but half-mocking words.

"Ah, yes, few were like her," sighed Miss Agate. "Theodore, in marrying Marian Snow, gained a prize. Yet," she added, "there were people found to say that his marriage could not have been happy, for that,

from his wedding-day, they had noticed him growing moody and morose."

"And was it so?"

"Well, I, too, had noticed him sorely changed from what he had been earlier; but in reality the change had begun long before his marriage. It seemed to me to set in while he was away from our house, acting as tutor in a gentleman's mansion in Surrey. After he came home, I used to wonder if my philosophic, simple-minded brother had been so led away by the luxury in which he had lived there, as to become discontented with our plain ways at home. I felt terribly disappointed in him."

"It may have been that you were right."

"Ah, no. Theodore's nature was above that. Afterwards, when it fell to my lot to go through his private diaries and papers, I discovered that at that period he had suffered losses and crosses, such as often darken or jar the finest minds. And he had in that mansion met with—— But I cannot go on: I have no right to," she broke off with a shiver.

None of her hearers spoke.

"After a short time he married," she resumed, evidently in pain. "And Marian's baby was born, and stolen away; stolen, I am quite certain, by the nurse she had hired. And then Theodore went mad. And Marian died of terror and woe. And since they let Theodore out of the asylum where they put him, he has lived shut in that back room, and that strip of green garden."

What a history it was!

"Theodore speaks of Marian sometimes," Miss Agate went on, in a low, awed voice. "He speaks of her as we speak of the dead with whom we have had sweet, happy days. But he has never mentioned the baby, or the manner of Marian's death. Of course, he knows he has been in a lunatic asylum, for he was a sane man before he left it. And I sometimes think that if any horror of the past flits across his mind, he may attribute it to a memory of his own delirious ravings. He never speaks of the time of his madness. And then, you know," she added, "a year after the time my little nephew was lost, my Evelyn was found."

"You need not go into that, Aunt Gertrude," said Evelyn, quite touchily. "I am sure you have explained all about it to Mr. Connell over and over again, asking his advice and that, as to how my relatives might be discovered. And it cannot interest Mr. Frank Raven," she added, with a little toss of her head.

Nothing about Evelyn Agate interested Frank, and so he did not contradict, which probably annoyed her.

"Yours has been a hard life, Miss Agate," said Philip thoughtfully.

"Possibly so," she replied.

"And entirely self-sacrificing."

"Not entirely. No."

"Oh, but it has. It has kept you single. But for all the burden you have had to carry I am sure you would have married."

Miss Agate shook her head with a grave smile.

"Many people do not marry," she said.

"And certainly, with my poor brother to keep and to care for, my duty was clear."

"Especially clear, as it only cost the

entire sacrifice of yourself," repeated Philip drily.

"Aunt Gertrude is exactly the sort of woman who never does get married," observed Evelyn. "I dare say she is happier as she is."

"What sort of women are they who *do* get married?" asked Philip, and Evelyn coloured.

"There's the postman!" she exclaimed, as a double knock was heard: and she sprang from her chair and hurried out.

"Poor Evelyn!" sighed Gertrude Agate, "I'm afraid I cannot have given her a very happy youth, for I think she'd be dreadfully ready to leave me. Had my dear Marian lived, she might have been able to train her into something more nearly resembling herself."

"That poor Marian is on your list of saints," said Philip kindly.

"And she was a saint. As nearly so as a woman can be."

Evelyn returned.

"The letter is for you, Aunt Gertrude,"

she said, in a disappointed tone, as she handed the missive to Miss Agate. "I see it is from the lawyers by the seal, and so I think they might have directed it to me, as it must be about my business. Oh, I wonder whether it is good news! I wonder what they have discovered?"

"That you are a Duchess's daughter, perhaps," said Philip gravely, as Miss Agate opened it, and read:

"DEAR MADAM,

"We regret that, on our communicating to our client the particulars you kindly gave us this morning, we were informed that they did not in the least suit the case in hand.

"We deeply regret having put you to the trouble of calling on us, and the pain of answering our questions,

"And remain, yours truly,

"DEWE AND CREED."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Evelyn.

Mortification reddened her cheeks, suppressed rage lay in her voice. The blow of

disappointment had shivered the veneer of her nature. She no longer looked handsome. Even her velveteen robe seemed to grow common and tawdry. But ambition had been aroused within her and could not be suppressed again. If these people held no clue to her birth, others might hold one. And, indeed, who was to know whether these lawyers told truth or not? Perhaps they did not choose to speak yet, perhaps the time for that was not come. She said something of this aloud.

"Perhaps so," assented Miss Agate calmly. "Meanwhile, Evelyn, my dear, you must be content to wait."

"Yes, Aunt Gertrude, but not here. I shall put an advertisement in the *Times* now for a situation as Lady's Companion. I will write it out this very night."



CHAPTER X.

MRS. RAVEN ADVERTISES.

MRS. RAVEN returned to Ravenstoke by an afternoon train on the Saturday, which enabled her to reach the Court in time for a late dinner. She had taken her comings and goings on this occasion quite into her own hands, having given directions that no carriage should be sent to await her at the station, and that, if she were not home in time, dinner need not be kept for her. She re-appeared, however, sooner than was expected, and it was thought she could not have had much time in London. Charity Hale, who met her in the hall, took the liberty of expressing her surprise as she followed her to her dressing-room.

"You are soon at home again, madam," she said, looking at Mrs. Raven, with her keen, peering eyes. "It was nice that you should get through your business so quickly."

"I did not get through it all," said Mrs. Raven. "I didn't succeed to-day, Charity."

"Oh, what a pity, ma'am," cried Charity. "Shall you have to take that weary journey again? Could not somebody else do it for you? What is hard and tiring for a lady like you, might be quite easy to some people—say, to the likes of me. If, indeed, it is business that you could entrust to others."

"Has anything happened—or anybody called—during my absence?" asked Mrs. Raven, passing over Charity's words, and keeping her back towards her while she hastily made the few slight toilet arrangements necessary for a *tête-à-tête* dinner with her son.

"The Vicar has been here, ma'am. He took lunch with master. James Sloam waited on them, and he says the parson talked a deal about Master Frank, and seemed rare fond of him,—I knew that would please you, ma'am,"

added Charity, as though Mrs. Raven had smiled—which she had not.

“James Sloam must learn that it is no part of a page’s duty to chatter over what he hears at table,” coldly replied Mrs. Raven. “I hope you reminded him of that.”

“James Sloam will learn his duty in time, ma’am: he wouldn’t talk over things to anybody but me,” said the old woman. “I’ll warrant he’d not say a word even to his own father, knowing that there are times when Eldred’s wits go out.”

“No other visitor?” said Mrs. Raven, chafing under the woman’s words—as she often had to chafe. But she rarely checked Charity Hale.

“No, ma’am,” answered Charity. “The Squire—he’s been going about, putting things to rights or wrongs, according as people may think. Everything is going to be cleared up and cleaned out.”

“Has he been down at the Vale Cottages, about those pigsties?” asked Mrs. Raven.

“I think so,” said Charity. “I’m mortal feared we’ll have a fever break out if they

are touched. To my idea stirring dangerous stuff to get it away is more likely to breed pestilence than leaving it at peace to waste away in the course of nature. But then I know that the letting it alone is only the way of poor, ignorant folk, and gentry can't be expected to abide it. The gentry canna let things be. It is only low people who would leave a cur sleeping, sooner than get a bite from him."

Mrs. Raven said nothing in reply. It had not occurred to her, while she turned her back on the old woman, that Charity could watch her face reflected in the mirror. But as she suddenly moved away, the old woman's image displaced her own in the looking-glass, and she caught a strange smile lurking about the thin lips. Quitting the room without a word, she left Charity standing in it.

Mrs. Raven went straight to the dining-room, though the gong had not yet sounded. The table was already spread, and the lamps were burning dimly, for the setting sun had still left a strong glory in the heavens above the belt of firs which bounded the horizon in

that direction. Mrs. Raven lingered at the window, looking out, but seeing nothing. She had stood so for ten minutes before the gong sounded and her son came in.

He greeted her with a surprised, cold exclamation: "Are you back so soon?" and went straight to his seat. She lingered a moment beside him as she passed to her place. But he was unfolding his napkin, and did not even look towards her. Kissing and clasping hands were not among the habits of the house. Mrs. Raven herself had checked Frank in those manifestations, and Leonard had never attempted them.

The meal was very silent. The page, James Sloam, was not in attendance, only the old butler, Budd, and a footman who went in and out of the room carrying dishes.

"I did not expect you could get back so soon," remarked her son. "Did you carry out your appointment?"

"Oh yes," she said in a slow indifferent tone, pausing to indicate her wish for some condiment on the table. "Oh yes, and it was very wearisome to find how easy it seemed to

get at everything but what one wanted. I don't think I shall look out for it any more."

"I'm afraid you had not sufficiently defined ideas of what you did want," observed Leonard.

She looked across the table with a sudden flash in her grey eyes. But she said nothing. She was only too thankful if he would let the subject drop thus, until they were alone.

When the meal was over, they both rose : Leonard rarely stayed to drink wine, and he instantly went to the little writing-table in the corner, and began to sum up figures in some account book. He had got into the habit of using this writing-table during his father's lifetime, when the Squire required the apartment which was called the study ; though the only books in it were a few agricultural works and some legal treatises on the position of landlord and tenant.

The butler proceeded to clear the table, wondering why his mistress did not retire as usual to the drawing-room. She could not find heart to go there ; she knew Leonard

would not follow her till a late hour, and to-night she felt so lonely—and it was so large and drear. She asked the old servant to bring her work-basket to her here. Budd obeyed, still wondering.

Leonard went on with his accounts, and Mrs. Raven stitched in silence. She had made up her mind that he should speak first, and his delay fretted her. It argued indifference and even contempt for a matter which she had led him to believe was eating away her heart. She knew that she meant to take a new cue now—and a false one—and she feverishly hoped he would readily accept her shifted position. And yet it nettled her to know that he had not heartily entered into her first standpoint.

Suddenly he wheeled his chair about, and spoke.

"I've done now. There's really nothing like getting everything stated in detail. I have struck forty pounds off the building estimates for the row of new cottages in Pond Lane, simply by finding that the porches cost that sum, and need not be added. And now,

mother, tell me all about your interview in London. Whom did you see—and what did you find out?”

“I saw both the partners in the firm,” she said, spreading her work on her knee and nervously folding and unfolding it. “And really it was very interesting—and painful. But there was nothing to act upon, and I may as well say at once, Leonard, that all I heard to-day does not induce me to prosecute the inquiry. There are more mysteries in the world than we are apt to imagine,” she added, having kept her eyes down while she spoke.

“I am inclined to think there is no mystery here except in your imagination,” returned Leonard, firmly. “You remember I have said so from the beginning. But if it really has had a strong hold on you all these years, I cannot understand your keeping it to yourself until now.”

“I kept silence,” she said slowly, “for many reasons. First, because I doubted my own powers of judgment, even as you doubt them now. I was in all the weak-

ness of my confinement when the suspicion came——”

“Still, it was but a suspicion, and no proof: you admit that,” interrupted Leonard.

“Of course,” said Mrs. Raven—and there she stopped to cough. “It shows my powers of self-command, that I gave it no word then. I argued with myself that if it were unreasonable, any whisper of doubt would create unnecessary scandal, but that if it were reasonable some better time would serve as well. And then your father was so proud of the fine healthy baby—and you, Leonard, were still so delicate—and he used to impress me with the vastness of the blessing which had at last given a hopeful heir to his old family line.”

There was a pause. Both were thinking.

“But Frank certainly has a Raven look, though he has not the Raven hair,” observed Leonard, glancing at Gilbert Raven’s portrait on the wall.

Leonard had not loved his father, nor had he, either by nature or training, any fine instincts or principles of morality. If Frank

was not Mrs. Raven's son, there seemed one easy way of accounting for his introduction into the family circle.

"I thought of that, too," said the widow, lowering her voice, as she caught Leonard's unspoken thought. "I reflected that to breathe any doubt was to cast a slur on my husband's honour; and I felt sure that any such slur could not attach to him, that he was not one to deserve it. No, that could never have been true, Leonard: so I made up my mind to bear in silence. You, my own boy, lived and flourished; why should I disturb the peace of the family by what seemed so like a whim?"

"Why, indeed," remarked Leonard.

"But, then," resumed Mrs. Raven, "look at your father's strange will! What did it mean? I marvelled; had he, too, had his doubts and kept them secret? And anything that gave colour to my old suspicion could only arouse a craving that had always accompanied it, to find my own child, if Frank were not mine. So I spoke to you, Leonard,

at last. If Frank be not my child—where is my child?”

“Dead, probably, if it was indeed taken from you,” said Leonard coolly. “I’m sure it is a miracle I lived, with the utmost skill and attention lavished on me. I believe that you have built up the whole story from a craze that got into your head when you were half delirious, mother—and your long-kept-up reticence served but to nourish it. How could such a thing be done—your own child changed for another—unless those about you were treacherous, and then they would not be likely to keep such a secret long.”

“True,” she faintly responded.

“As for my father’s will, I don’t think there was anything so very peculiar about it, and what there was points in a different direction from your fancy. Frank was undoubtedly my father’s favourite, and his arrangement, I think, shows how much he trusted your love for Frank. Would he have done so, had he any reason for imagining that you might, sooner or later, discover his favourite to be but a changeling? For I

know Frank *was* my father's favourite : he never cared for me," Leonard repeated frankly.

"All you say is very reasonable, Leonard," said his mother, softly. "So reasonable, that it confirms me in the wisdom of my decision to stop in this quest. Since you think as you do, you will be glad to hear that I told the lawyers to make no further inquiries."

"That's all right," said Leonard ; "had you found it practicable to air your fancy years ago, you would have abandoned it long ago ; that's my opinion. I suppose ventilation is as necessary for people's minds as for their houses. And considering how hard it is to reconcile them to it in the latter, I expect they keep their former in a terribly stuffy state."

"I suppose I had better make a full confession while I am about it," she went on in a strange low tone ; which, to any ear less obtuse than her son's, would have conveyed the idea of caressing, almost cringing, entreaty. "All these years, especially when I felt disappointed by Frank's strong, restless, active

boyishness, I have allowed my imagination to dwell on that (possibly) lost child of my own. I always picture it a girl. You see, in my own mind, I could picture it anything I liked, and it was easier to dream of a daughter as my sympathising companion in all my lonely walks and works."

"It is a great pity you never had a daughter of your own, mother," said Leonard.

"I have had a very solitary life," cried Mrs. Raven, with a sudden passion which startled even Leonard, while she went on with what seemed strangely like self-vindication against some invisible accuser. "I believe I should have been quite a different creature had I lived the crowded, sunshiny life of most women. They are not good or happy thoughts which come by brooding! And now," she added after a moment's pause, and with a sudden return to her ordinary manner, "my life is lonelier than ever. Though your father spent so much time in the open air, and though Frank had so little in common with me, yet their absence leaves a great blank. I have made up my mind that

Frank must be got home as quickly as possible, and brought to a better understanding with us. But it is not likely he will ever settle down here ; he will only come and go. And in these silent days I am getting haunted by the idea of this daughter I have so long fancied I might have had."

Leonard could not quite understand his mother.

"Do not check me for speaking out this fresh folly, Leonard, when you have just blamed me for concealing another. I must have some sort of companionship ; some young girl here who will love me."

"What do you want to do ?" Leonard inquired, rather unsympathetically.

"I am thinking of advertising for a lady companion," she said, rising from her chair, and bending over a vase of flowers on a stand, "but I would not do such a thing without consulting you."

"Why not ?" asked Leonard. "What right have I to interfere in your wishes ?"

"You will have to tolerate her in the family," said his mother. "She must sit at

table with us. It will be a great boon to me if you can endure it, and if I find a person who suits me, we shall be well accustomed to each other by the time I have to leave here and go to the dower-house—when you marry.” She had come round to his side, and laid both her hands on his shoulder.

“There will be no hurry for that,” he observed.

“And promise me one thing, Leonard,” she went on, “and do not be angry with me for exacting the promise.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“That you will not be led away into falling in love with any young person I may hire!”

Leonard laughed. “That is easily promised, mother. If I ever marry, I have made up my mind to marry enough money to buy the Overhill estate: the land would lie so well with mine. You needn’t be afraid of me. But if you’ve made up your mind to have Frank at home again, that will be a different matter. He is sure to do the wrong thing and leave undone the right.”

“Frank is not you,” remarked his mother,

coldly. "He will never be anything but a second son."

"I don't know that you are wise in wanting to bring him much about this house now," reflected Leonard. "Whenever I do marry, he must go, of course; and the less he has grown to regard Raven as his head-quarters when that time comes, the better for us both."

"You have always so much common sense, Leonard," said Mrs. Raven, wearily. "But you must yield to me in this, my dear. I must have Frank here once more—not as a guest, knowing when he is to go, but as an inmate. I have been vainly telling myself that I *must* be his mother for the last twenty-two years, and just as I began to leave off so doing, the mother yearning has come," she added, with a piteous smile. "He will not interfere with you. And I must have my companion too. I have your permission and your promise as to *her*, have I not, Leonard?"

"Certainly," he answered. "Both were alike unnecessary."

"Then, as this has been a fatiguing day

and I feel tired, I will go to my room," she said, rising. "Good-night, Leonard."

"Good-night, mother," he responded, and opened the door for her to pass out.

"I never thought her nerves could have shaken so," reflected Leonard, as he returned to his seat. "Why, she looks as if she had just recovered from a fever. I ought to have put my veto on all this imaginary nonsense when she first mentioned it. But she pleaded as plausibly on the one side then, as she pleads to-night on the other. And then, too, I am quite sure she had her suspicions of—of my father. It is indeed high time she had a companion; and when she gets one, I must send them both away for change of air and scene."

Mrs. Raven went to her room, it is true, but she did not go to her bed. She opened her desk, and sat down before it.

She wanted a companion; how was she to discover one? True, the want had been suggested to her by hearing that Evelyn Agate wished to go out as such. She wanted *her*.

We can act upon what we hear ; but what we overhear may paralyse us. We can scarcely act upon a knowledge we ought not to have possessed. How were the demand and the supply to be brought together ?

She had Miss Agate's address. She had seen it on the note the lawyer had shown her, and there was no fear of her forgetting it. But it was impossible to write to a stranger, inquiring if any member of her family wished to become a lady's companion. Such a course would be certainly both impertinent and suspicious, sure to defeat its own ends. It was equally impossible to communicate with Miss Agate through the solicitors.

No : there was no direct path to attain her wish. There was nothing to be done, save write a tempting advertisement and send it to the newspapers. If Evelyn Agate really wished for such a situation, she would be sure to search them. And Mrs. Raven proceeded to draw up one.

She tried to make it as pleasant as possible. She lingered over its composition almost



lovingly, touching and re-touching again and again. The result stood thus.

“Wanted, by a lady of position, having no daughters, a young lady to act as companion. A beautiful country home and a liberal salary are offered, and she will be treated with motherly kindness and consideration.” And applications were requested to be addressed to the chief library in the neighbouring county town, Standchester.

Mrs. Raven wrote six copies of this before she went to bed—each to be forwarded to an eligible London newspaper.





CHAPTER XI.

THE LODGER AT THE PITCHFORK.

MRS. RAVEN made no concealment of her advertisement. She rang for her maid, and gave the letters into her keeping, to be carried to the letter-rack, against the postman brought his bag on the Monday morning.

Thus the whole household had the opportunity of seeing the waiting letters, and they made their comments.

“Six newspapers!” exclaimed Mrs. Sims, the housekeeper, as she sat at the breakfast-table of the upper servants on this same Monday morning. “What can the mistress have to say to six newspapers?”

"Charity Hale knows," said one of the others, noticing the sly pursing of the old woman's thin lips. "Charity Hale knows everything—only she never tells."

"A still tongue makes a wise head," croaked Charity.

"Mrs. Raven may be advertising for a furnished house at a watering-place," suggested the butler. "She needs a change; she has seemed poorly ever since the Squire died."

"What did she go to London for on Saturday?" cried Sims. "To see a house agent, perhaps? She seemed to have been looking for something, I thought, when she came home, and to have got downcast because she did not get it."

"It's more likely she's going to make changes here," hazarded Fanny, the only young domestic present; "get brisker servants, or something. How would you like *that*, Mrs. Sims?"

"I don't think that," put in Budd: "hold your silly tongue, girl."

"Well," said the girl, pertly, "it is hardly

likely the changes that are said to be afloat out of doors, will stop there."

"They are to go on briskly enough there, I fancy," admitted the butler. "It's said that one of the first to be sent off the estate will be Eldred Sloam."

"What, out of his cottage!" cried the housekeeper.

Mr. Budd nodded.

"I heard the master say as much to Mr. Toynbee on Saturday when I was waiting on them at lunch."

Charity set down her cup of tea and gave a little cough, as if she had narrowly escaped choking.

"It was not you who waited at lunch on Saturday," she said to the butler snappishly; "it was James Sloam."

"It was I at first—until James came in. As to Sloam, he'd not be a loss to anybody if he did go: unless it was to James. And not to him either, that I see. That the lad has grown up a good and decent lad, though a bit soft, is no thanks to his father. A nice example *he* has set him!"

"You are right there, Mr. Budd," assented Mrs. Sims. "James takes after his mother, poor body. She was a plain girl, but as true-hearted as you'd wish. She was in the still-room here when I came first; one of those quiet girls that don't get noticed much. Eldred Sloam used to be coming here, after her, I thought; and there was something about the man that I did not like, handsome though he was. 'Don't you have aught to say to him, Jane,' I said to her; ay, more than once. But in spite of all I could do or say, the silly girl married him."

"Oh," flippantly remarked Fanny. "Pity is akin to love, they say."

"Pity is the back-door of love, I say," retorted Mrs. Sims, "and it's not the best of characters that enter that way. And so poor Jane found to her cost. She had to put up with Eldred Sloam for eleven years, with his ill-doings and his temper, and all that while she never said a true word against him in anger, nor a false one of praise out of pride. I was with her when she died, poor body, and I've always taken an interest in her boy James

for her sake. It's not much his father has taken, more shame for him."

"He is a rare good-looking man yet, I think, is Eldred Sloam," put in Fanny, aggressively, simply because she liked to tease Mrs. Sims.

"As Squire Eldred Raven was before him," cried Charity Hale.

"Maybe—with a difference, though," said Mrs. Sims. "Squire Eldred looked like a gentleman, for all his wild ways, as I've heard say many times; this man looks like a dauntless ne'er-do-well."

"Eldred Sloam would have been a different man if he had had the luck to get the right sort of wife," said Charity, with asperity. "Instead of a soft thing like Jane."

"And that a man like him takes care not to get," said Mrs. Sims. "The right sort for him wouldn't have been a Christian English woman, but a wild Tartar. If ever a man deserves to be served out himself for what he has brought on others, it's Eldred Sloam. Look at the story told about that poor young

girl—what was her name?—Hester Walker—some years before!"

"What was that?" asked Fanny, eagerly.

"There are stories and things one don't care to talk of in public," put in the butler hastily, who may have thought it time to interfere. It was somewhat difficult, however, to arrest Mrs. Sims' tongue, once it was fairly set going.

"You needn't be afraid, Mr. Budd. I know, I hope, what things may be said and what may not. A young lass came into the place from some one of the villages near to take service with the Miss Maynes—two ladies who lived at Cross Cottage. Her name was Hester Walker: as nice a little girl as you'd see, Mrs. Fisher says. And Eldred, he was soon after her, and everybody thought he was going to get married that time—they had thought it before, you see. By-and-by the lass took to go about crying; her mistresses could not make it out. One day she came to them and said she must go home, that her mother had sent for her, and she packed her trunk and went—and it put

out the old ladies dreadfully. They were frightened and angry and they let her go."

"And what became of her?" asked the inquisitive Fanny.

"Ah—what? Who knows? A week or two afterwards the mother came over to Cross Cottage to see her daughter, not hearing from her latterly, she told the ladies. She had not seen Hester, and did not know she had left her situation. A fine to-do it made. Everybody laid the blame at Eldred Sloam's door, for his name was bad even then, though Mrs. Fisher says she always did believe him, when he declared he did not know what had become of that girl. He says so to this day. Jane knew that story, mind you; for I took care to repeat it all to her, word for word, just as Mrs. Fisher related it to me. But it did no good: Jane wouldn't believe a word of it."

"She didn't think anybody had invented it, did she?" asked Charity, with a sneer. "Who's this, bursting in?"

The door was flung back with a bound, and the page, James Sloam, entered. His broad,

plebeian face certainly owed nothing to any presumed aristocratic blood on his father's side. But its coarse plainness was redeemed by the frankness and kindness of its expression. Sent by the coachman on an early errand to the village, he had there met, as was evident, with something to excite him.

"Does anybody here believe in witches?" he asked, as he stood with open mouth and eyes, before the company.

"What do you mean by talking of witches?" croaked Charity severely.

"There's a witch at the Pitchfork," answered the lad. "I went over there about the straw, and Giles the ostler told me of her."

"Don't you go and be friendly with the Pitchfork—or with its ostler either," advised Mrs. Sims. "If the late Squire had been of my opinion, he'd not have allowed any tavern in the place, save the old respectable White Hart. That Pitchfork *is* a beauty. What did Giles say about a witch?"

"She doesn't call herself a witch, ma'am,

Giles said ; she calls herself a—some queer word—a—a clear-voyer,” stammered Jem.

“A clairvoyante,” exclaimed the butler. “Oh, then, that’s a different thing. Clairvoyance is scientific. Leastways, it’s said to be a new power, sprung up of late years.”

“Giles says she does not want to do any clear-voying here,” resumed James. “She only told them she was one that they might not be frightened if she took a queer sort of fit. She’s a foreigner, from Egypt, they think : a big, dark woman, fair spoken. Well, the missis at the Pitchfork, hearing this, was taken with a wish to know something about her brother that went to sea and never came back. And Worsfold, he said to his wife, ‘Of course she could tell you something about your brother—I could do that myself,’ said he, ‘but how are you going to decide whether it’s true or not?’”

“There’s more sense in Worsfold than one would have thought,” remarked Mrs. Sims.

“The missis saw the force of that,” said James, “and she thought it over. ‘Suppose,’

says she to Worsfold, 'we was to ask her to tell us all she can about us, saying ne'er a word ourselves; then, if she speaks truth about what we do know, surely we may trust that she speaks it about what we don't.' And so up she went to the lodger, and they had a deal of talking together; and the master, Giles says, was waiting anxious at the bottom of the stairs. But she brought no news down. The clear-voyer wouldn't do anything then—or couldn't, maybe, thinks Giles. She told the missis she did not want to do anything in this place, Ravenstoke, because there was evil in the air."

"Like her impudence!" exclaimed Mrs. Sims.

"That set the missis on, more eager than ever, Giles says: he's not sure that it didn't set the master. She went up again to the clear-voyer and told her she'd make it well worth her while; but the clear-voyer answered at once that if she spoke of money it would spoil her gift altogether: that what she did she did for love—to help people, never for money."

"Come, that looks honest. What next, James?"

"And at last she promised that she'd do her best by-and-by. And a precious puzzling best it is, Giles says. Yesterday afternoon, when all was quiet about the place, being Sunday, the clear-voyer had 'em up to her room, Worsfold and his wife both, with the blinds pulled close down, and she said the fit was coming on, and presently she'd go off quite insensible, and in that state tell them what they wanted to know. Sure enough she did go off, and began to talk in her sleep, as it were, and they both listened, all in a fright, like, to what she said. She lay back with her eyes shut, giving one or two little snores or gasps; and the missus she crept to the door and let in Dolly the maid, and Giles himself stood all eager to hear outside."

"Best to have witnesses in such unearthly doings," nodded Sims.

"They all sat as still as mice," continued James, "till she began to mutter. And then, Giles thinks they got more than they bargained for. For not only did the clear-voyer

tell of the missis's brother that went to sea, but she told why he went—to get out of the way after stealing the old schoolmaster's hens. Which was true enough."

"My patience!" ejaculated Fanny. James went on.

"The queer thing was, she didn't tell things right plain out, but said she saw him among birds in a yard—and then running round a corner and looking, scared, behind him; and then on a big ship; and last of all, lying stretched out under a great tree, of some strange sort such as she'd never seen before. But more than that. She told how Worsfold's father had been drowned in a mill-dam—a noisy water with a big wheel going round, she called it. She even let on how he'd been drinking too much before it happened. Giles said his blood ran cold, for he thought she might be reading out next how he went to the cellar last Christmas and helped himself to the brandy: and Dolly, he says, looked, on her part, awful queer."

James's present listeners did not know what to make of this, or how to take it.

"Is that all?" they asked.

"No, it is not all," answered the boy, impressively. "For she went on, talking about the evil in the air, that which is past and that which is coming : and next she seemed to see a tall figure that walks at night between the Court and a cottage—and Giles says there couldn't well be any mistake that she meant father's cottage. It had walked at times for years and years, she said, and it wasn't laid yet, and no living mortal could foresee when it would be."

Mrs. Sims, taking the bacon-dish from the table at the moment, let it drop in consternation.

"Did she speak of *that*, James? Mercy preserve us! Did she say—did she say what the figure was like?"

"Not much of that, I think," answered the lad. "Only that he had a red mark on his neck; and she could see him turn round about, she said, and shake his fist at the Court."

"That woman's nothing canny, you may be sure," spoke Charity Hale. "Witch, or

no witch, she must have dealings"—and the old nurse paused with a significant nod—"dealings with darkness. As to the figure—it has not been seen lately."

"I don't know that," corrected the butler. "Mrs. Fisher, at the White Hart, tells a tale of some young lady, staying there recently for the night, being frightened by a queer-looking character that she met by starlight on that same road. Or moonlight—I forget which she said. The young lady spoke about it to Mrs. Fisher, and the landlady, in her turn, spoke to me."

James went on. "When the clear-voyer came to her senses, Worsfold hinted that they'd be ready to pay her well for what she had done, and that he did not intend to take any score from her. But she bade him hold his tongue: that she should pay him as she paid other innkeepers; and she reminded him that she took no pay for what she was enabled to tell. She speaks real haughty, Giles says, and has such a grand manner with her."

"I wonder," slowly deliberated Mr. Budd,

"why she should have come to the Pitchfork at all?"

"The curious thing is, sir, Giles says that his missis is not a bit easier in her mind about her brother than she was before. First thing this morning, she and Worsfold fell out over it, she saying the clear-voyer's words meant that Tom is resting himself on some desert island, maybe after his labours in digging up gold, and that he'll hail a ship some day and come home and make their fortunes. But he says it's meant that Tom is stretched out stark and cold at the bottom of the sea, among the corals and things that grow there; and that he should always have thought so without being told, but for knowing that his brother-in-law, Tom, was one of those unlucky people who escape drowning for hanging."

"And as that is all you have to tell, I suppose, James," cried Mrs. Sims, "you can go into the pantry and set about your duties."

It appeared the signal for the rest to rise, and to go about theirs. Presently no one

was left in the room save Mrs. Sims and the lady's-maid, Janet Mackay : a staid, respectable Scotchwoman, who had not very long come into service at the Court. Naturally reticent and cautious, she had listened to the conversation in silence.

"There has been a good deal said that you don't understand, I suppose?" began the housekeeper to her, presently.

"In truth I don't," answered Janet. "That allusion to a figure that walks between the Court and Eldred Sloam's—is it a ghost?"

"Supposed to be. The ghost of Squire Eldred Raven. And good cause his spirit has to walk that road : he walked it too often in his lifetime."

"How so?"

"That cottage of Sloam's was the laundry in those days ; and where there is a laundry there is generally a laundry-maid, you know, and she is sometimes pretty. Perhaps I had better tell you the story from the beginning."

"If you will. I have often felt puzzled at these allusions."

"Squire Eldred Raven, a fine, handsome

man as was ever seen, they say, but wild and careless as to conduct, lived here, a bachelor. His brother, Captain Raven, was with his regiment in India; news came that he was killed in battle, and Squire Eldred wrote to tell the widow she had better come home—her little son would be his heir, you see, unless he married himself. The poor lady, weakened by sorrow, was not strong enough to undertake the voyage, but she sent the little boy, Henry. Charity Hale, a young woman then, became his nurse, and the Squire grew very fond of the child——”

“I beg your pardon for interrupting the story,” spoke Janet. “That child, Henry—was it our late master who has just died?”

“To be sure it was. After a bit, the lady started from India with her other child, a baby-girl, but she died on the voyage, poor thing, and only the little girl arrived—Miss Millicent, she that’s Mrs. Connell now. Well, after a time, a younger sister of Charity Hale’s came into service here, to do light things—not rough work. Never such a contrast hardly seen, I’ve heard, as there was

between her and Charity. Charity, plain in face, crabbed, prim, and with all the ways of a servant; Salome, pretty and sprightly and dressy, and always idle and flighty. Some whim took Charity after a bit to put her sister into the laundry, to learn to iron, and Salome went there to the old widow Sloam, who was head of it. By-and-by, people began to talk. They asked what it was that Squire Eldred wanted at the laundry-house in an evening—for he would be seen going there. Well, it was the old tale, Janet; and the next thing that appeared at the laundry was a baby—this very Eldred Sloam.”

“Eldred *Sloam*! I do not understand.”

“The poor child had no right to any name in particular, you see, so they called him that for want of a better, and it was like his mother’s Christian name. It was said that Charity took him to church and had him named Eldred—which was like her impudence. She did it out of spite, perhaps; for she really loved Salome, and the discovery drove her nearly mad. Salome never held

up her head again ; she felt the disgrace more than such often do. Before she was anything like well, she left the cottage, running away from it one morning betimes, going off, widow Sloam said, like a mad woman. The Squire went in search of her, and found her ; in London, as was said, but nobody knew where for certain. In a month or two's time she was back again at the old cottage with Mrs. Sloam. The laundry had then been removed to the back premises here, where it is still, so Mrs. Sloam had the old cottage without the work, and attended to the baby, Eldred. Well, Janet, in time there came another baby, and poor Salome died when it was born."

"Died !"

"And in two or three days afterwards, Squire Eldred was dead, too."

Janet Mackay nearly screamed.

"It was said he was the worse for liquor ; I don't know if that's true ; but he was on horseback, and the horse grew restive and ran away and threw him. He was killed on the spot. And it happened on the very walk that he took so often in his lifetime, for the

horse was dashing madly across it, and he fell right in the path."

"What a dreadful thing!"

"The little nephew, Henry, succeeded to all the property. His trustees allowed Mrs. Sloam, who had charge of the boy, Eldred, to retain the house, and paid her some money weekly. Whether they did it out of a feeling of justice, or whether Squire Eldred had ever said to his lawyer that he wished it done in case of ill happening to him, was not known. When Squire Henry came of age, he continued to do the same thing—to the widow Sloam until her death, and then to the man Eldred—not liking, I take it, to root up old institutions. It is whispered now, though, that the new Squire intends to stop the weekly allowance and to turn the man from the cottage. Eldred Sloam is no credit to the place, but *I* shouldn't do it."

"What was it they meant about a red mark on the neck?"

"Squire Eldred had a large curious red mark on his neck, was born with it. Not but what the Squire was red all over; and he had

the Raven red hair, and so had Squire Henry : and so has Eldred Sloam."

"And the present master also," said Janet.

"The present master ! The young master's is reddish in a way, but his is no more like the real Raven hair than withered grass is like full-eared corn."

"What became of Salome Hale's last baby !"

"It was fetched away by some of poor Salome's people and has never been heard of since. I dare say it's dead ; 'twas a little girl. Charity couldn't take it, you see, being here at the Court, even if she would. That past business just soured her for life, and has made her the cynical woman she is. The Hales were superior people, you see, till this happened, above the run of common servants, and the disgrace told upon them. There was another sister, I believe, but she didn't live in these parts."

"It is a sad history," was the comment of Janet Mackay.

"Charity liked the Squire who has just gone ; it seems to me that she quite resents

his death, if one may say such a thing," concluded Sims. "But she does not like Mr. Leonard : and there has never been any love lost between her and Mrs. Raven."

"And what became of the sister—the little lady from India?"

"Miss Millicent Raven—oh, she grew up here with her brother. After Squire Eldred's death the trustees got a lady to come here to superintend the children ; she was some relation, I've heard, of their mother. A nice lady she was, good and capable, but she died close upon Miss Millicent's marriage. Miss Millicent's name is not often mentioned in the house. She married to please herself ; he was only a dissenting minister, a worthy gentleman, I believe, but not high enough for the Ravens. The Squire thought she might have done better, and was very angry : he and his sister never met after her marriage. It was her son who came down here for a few days last autumn for the shooting."

"What ! That light-hearted young bar-rister?"

"Yes. Mr. Philip Connell."



CHAPTER XII.

MRS. RAVEN DOES HER DUTY.

WHEN Charity left the servants' hall, she went straight towards Mrs. Raven's apartments. That lady was seated behind her davenport in the boudoir, making out a list of some valuable family lace, before laying it away until her days of mourning should be ended. She looked up when the door opened—and her eyes and Charity's met. The lady's fell.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said Charity, in her smooth, acid tones. "Do you want me this morning?"

Mrs. Raven went on with her writing, but her hand trembled, and she found a strange

difficulty in spelling such a simple word as "fichu."

"Presently, Charity," she said. "I wish to arrange some of my drawers this morning: your good memory and tidy touch are just what I require. I want a great deal of such help nowadays. Do you know, Charity, I am thinking of taking a young lady-companion."

"Indeed, madam," said Charity, "that's a very nice idea—and a natural one. Once on a time, ladies could get those that were almost gentlefolks themselves, to be their maids. It is not so now. They mustn't be called by that name. But many a young lady would be glad to come and live with you, and do some of the little things that maids were fit for once."

"I have Mackay—and I have you, Charity," said Mrs. Raven, "but I feel very lonely, and my sons must be away from me, and so I have advertised for a lady-companion. The letters that went off this morning contained the advertisement."

"Now, was I not clever?" cried Charity,

in a sort of eldritch glee. "I could not help fancying it was something of that sort the minute I saw those letters."

Mrs. Raven's heart beat heavily. She was now standing before a small set of toilet drawers, which held private matters, and she went on examining them. Unfolding a roll of richly brocaded cherry-coloured ribbon, she observed that it might be dyed: the colour was a little faded, and therefore it would be useless to put it away, and it would take black beautifully.

"I don't know," said Charity; "the fading would not show if it were twisted up into the bows and fal-lals young damsels wear on their gowns nowadays. The new young lady that's coming might be rare glad of it, madam."

"A companion is not a maid to receive worn garments, Charity," answered Mrs. Raven, bending over her ribbons and speaking very quietly, but with a red spot burning strangely in her cheeks.

"No, no, madam; don't think I misunderstand," returned the old woman. "But a



lady like you might give her some of your own things, as you might to a daughter of your own."

"I've often wished I had a daughter, Charity," said Mrs. Raven. "Though, if we are wise, we should wish for nothing that does not exist."

"Ah, true, madam. But who is always wise? And sometimes, when we get what we wish, we wish back what we had before. But changes must come, anyway. It is in the course of nature."

"The less change the better!" retorted Mrs. Raven, with a sudden energy.

Her soul was crying out for some lonely hermitage in some vast wilderness, where nothing could mark the passing of the days but the rising and setting of the sun; so that she might have possible rest from the doubts and suspicions and fears which haunted her like a host of invisible and tormenting demons.

"I think so too, madam: the less change the better. But the new Squire doesn't."

"Some changes must be for the better, of course, Charity."

"Aye," returned the woman, "and of course all is for the best, and will turn out right. But there's risks in most things."

Mrs. Raven did not look up. She knew those small sharp eyes were on her, and she felt cold from head to foot.

"I'm fearing to myself that the Squire may be thinking me an encumbrance next," said Charity. "I hope he will speak if he does. I should not like to stay to be a burden. I have long thought of a day when I might be told to go—and I've provided for it," she added, in a low whisper, which had nothing of bravado or insolence in it, but which, somehow, Mrs. Raven shuddered at.

"My son will not interfere with the household servants while I am here. Note you that, Charity."

"Ah, no, perhaps not, ma'am. But poor people have their feelings like rich ones, and if one's place is turned inside out, one might as well be turned outside one's self. I am not quite myself, maybe, this morning," she



added, "for I have been hearing something I don't like : and we get frightened easily when we are old."

"What is it that you have been hearing?"

"There is a strangely queer woman staying at the Pitchfork. James went there on an errand, and he brought back the news. She professes to see the past, and to foretell the future—and she declares that there is evil in the air at Ravenstoke."

Mrs. Raven had looked round in surprise. "Why, who is she?—What can she be doing at the Pitchfork?"

"That's what I should like to know," said Charity. "She talks of ghosts, too. She told the people there that the figure of a tall man, with a red mark on his neck, walks at night along the Warren Road, and looks back to shake his fist at the Court here. I am glad Mr. Frank is away, madam : though I dare be bound he'd only laugh at it, and call it rubbish. I knew a lady who could never bear to hear the wind in the ivy when her husband was away from home. The meaning of things is in the ear that hears them."

Mrs. Raven sat down in the chair that was drawn up close behind her, a whole world of thought revolving in her brain. A curious dread of this strange woman had seized upon her mind. What did she know?—for what purpose had she come to Ravenstoke? Charity saw her mistress's perplexity.

"Don't you take it to heart, madam," she cried. "I'd not have told you, but that I thought you'd be above caring for it. But it's little wonder you are nervous just now, with the trouble there's been in the house."

"I'm not taking it to heart, Charity: what do you mean? But I am vexed. These people ought not to be allowed to say such things. They are wicked and cruel."

"No, they ought not," assented Charity, quite readily. "For a ghost is seldom a credit to a gentleman's house, though it may be interesting to strangers round about it. Dear, dear, how the dust is getting into these little drawers!" broke off Charity, in a different tone, peeping into the contents of a Duchesse toilet-table.

"We must spread paper on the top of

them : they won't be opened again for a long while," said Mrs. Raven wearily.

"They will have to be very small sheets of paper," remarked Charity ; "and they always get caught in the backs of the drawers."

"Go downstairs and get some of my thick note-paper with the coloured monogram on it," directed her mistress, after a moment's thought. "It is so thick that it will stay as we put it. You will find it in the bottom drawer of the cabinet in the back drawing-room."

Charity obeyed. She was not gone three minutes ; for though she was a little lame, and at times walked heavily, she was often wonderfully active for a woman of her years. She handed the packet to Mrs. Raven.

"Is that right, madam ? I found it where you told me."

And then they busied themselves with the shaking out, assorting, and refolding of the delicate laces, Charity passing them on to her mistress, who packed them away and covered them up with her own hands.

"I hope none of our servants have been to

see this fortune-teller," exclaimed Mrs. Raven, as if the thought had struck her; "or that they will go. It is wrong to countenance such people. They are often thieves, or worse."

"I'd not answer for what the servants may do, madam. They are but simple ones."

"The Squire will be annoyed if he hears of this. Especially if those foolish stories gain currency about the figure appearing again in the Warren Walk."

"And that they will be sure to do," asserted Charity in a positive tone. "The girls will be going out to look for it now, I shouldn't wonder."

"This gipsy woman ought to be warned that Mr. Raven will not tolerate such characters on his land. Not publicly; privately. Any publicity might do more harm than good—and cause a scandal in the place. Could you carry a message to her, Charity?"

"I'd rather not, ma'am," answered Charity, shrinking back. "The others would never

believe but what I was consulting her for myself."

Mrs. Raven hesitated. She feared this woman. Charity Hale lay at the bottom of all the surmises and terrors. But even fear makes a sort of tie. And if all that she dreaded and suspected were true, she scarcely knew whether to regard Charity as a secret ally or an open foe.

"I think it would be best for everybody if she were to be told what would befall her at the Squire's hands, and advised to go quietly away at once," observed Mrs. Raven. "I think I will go to her myself: perhaps this evening. It is, in a way, my duty."

"I should say, ma'am, that will be best—for everybody," answered Charity.

The drawers were arranged by this time. Charity discharged a few more little duties about her mistress's room, and then went away. Nobody saw her again till the servants' dinner hour. Charity usually did her darnings and mendings in her own apartment, holding rather aloof from the comings and goings and general sociability of the servants' hall.

Mrs. Raven did not leave the house all day. When her son was from home she generally took an early dinner, and went out for a stroll after afternoon tea. To-day was to be no exception to this ordinary rule. Mrs. Sims, chatting with the gardener about vegetable prospects, saw the lady walk out for her evening ramble. She was not a woman who stopped to speak with her servants, and a lowering of her thin blue-veined eyelids was her sole recognition of their courtesy and salute.

On she went, past her own lodge, out into the high road, between its green hedges where the leaves were already drooping. Village matrons peeped at her as she passed, and commented on the length of her widow's veil and the paleness of her face. She passed the Vicarage, half wondering to herself whether it might not have been wise to enlist the Reverend Jasper Toynbee in a crusade for the sake of his ignorant and superstitious flock, and so send him to deliver the message she was carrying. Near the church workmen were lingering. There was

a sort of shy pathos in their faces as they touched their hats to her—for they were employed on her dead husband's monument.

The Pitchfork was a very homely hostelry, standing behind a row of polled trees on the edge of Raven Green. Its hostess kept cows, and thought a great deal more of them than of her bar. It was but a mild sort of dissipation that went on inside the Pitchfork, or on the heavy seat outside its door; nevertheless, it was much and justly dreaded by village matrons, and had been steadily discountenanced by the late Squire and the Vicar. Therefore the hearts of both Mr. and Mrs. Worsfold failed them when they saw Mrs. Raven making straight for their porch.

“Good-evening,” she said, coldly; and waited while they respectfully returned the salutation. “I am given to understand you have taken in a lodger who is a kind of fortune-teller. My servants are speaking of her already. You should discourage the presence of such a person on your premises, Worsfold; my son, as you may know, would

not like it. I hope you will send her away before the matter reaches his ears."

"She doesn't profess to tell fortunes," said Worsfold, in eager apology. "It was only some of my missis's nonsense, wanting to hear things as is better hid. I'll do anything you think right, ma'am: it stands to reason we should consider the Squire's pleasure first of all. But it'll seem queer-like to have to tell the creature to go for doing what we asked her to do."

"There is no need to trouble yourself, good man," interposed the clear hard voice of somebody who was descending the stairs. "The 'creature' is already going: and she is now about to pay you."

With the last words the stranger stood before Mrs. Raven. She was a tall woman, with a fine, strongly-featured face, covered with minute wrinkles, which gave her an appearance of old age inconsistent with her upright figure and vigorous spirit. She was handsomely dressed, without any sign of gawdiness or tawdriness, and yet her garments, like herself, lacked the something

which stamps the lady, or even the well-bred, respectable woman. There was a snapping flash in her black eyes ; her full lips were straight and tightly drawn ; and she carried a small handbag, all the luggage she had brought to the Pitchfork.

Advancing to the counter, she threw down a sovereign and asked for change, which Mrs. Worsfold tremblingly counted out. She entirely ignored Mrs. Raven's existence, though that lady felt that the woman was thoroughly alive to her presence. What strong, masculine hands she had, white and soft, as though with idleness ! Mrs. Raven shrank from her in a dread not definable. She shuddered to remember that it was a hidden interest—a personal fear—which had drawn her here into some sort of relation with this woman.

“ Pay yourself well, hostess,” said the parting guest, in her deep, harsh tones. “ I don't grudge giving you another bit of wisdom before I go,” she added, as she took the change, “ and I'll set it up in rhyme, to pin it into your memory. Listen : it's something

so good, that you might repeat it to your Vicar—

“ They who wish a thought of ill
Find it easy to fulfil ;
When they wish to crush its fruit,
Lo, the several seeds take root ;
When with others' sins they twine,
Who need question, ‘ Mine or thine ’ ? ”

Mrs. Raven turned and stepped from the porch before the verse was complete. The Worsfolds felt that she was mortally affronted, and did not wonder at it, seeing the mingling of cool impudence and angry defiance in the woman's manner. She dropped the change into her bag, wished the host and hostess farewell, and strode away in turn. They stood in the porch and watched.

The strange woman overtook Mrs. Raven at the pond, just beyond the polled trees. She passed her, then turned round and stood still, straight in the lady's path.

Mrs. Raven also stood quite still : there was nothing else to do. To attempt to fly would be useless. By a strong effort of will she commanded all her dignity ; all that



hereditary consciousness of importance and power which had never failed her till within the last few days. Looking at her adversary, she met the cold black eyes gleaming, not like fires, but like knives—met them resolutely. She felt on the edge of the worst—of a worst which she could not fathom—and she rallied in desperation to confront it.

The two women stood so, facing each other, for a full minute. Mrs. Raven began to be aware of a horrible sensation of inability to withdraw her gaze. The handsome, repulsive face seemed magically to change beneath it. Elusive memories peeped through it, mocked and vanished. Was her brain giving way? The woman broke into a low metallic laugh.

“Go home, Mrs. Raven,” she said; “I have nothing to say to you. Go home, and look in the second drawer of your small toilet set. Take out the covering paper—the top paper, mind—and hold it over your candle—and take warning.”

She passed swiftly to the cross-roads, and was lost to sight. Mrs. Raven, gazing after her in consternation, pulled her senses

together with a shiver. Stumbling along half blindly, she remembered that the last train had left Ravenstoke: where was the woman going?

Worsfold and his wife recollected that, too. But he suggested that "she was one of the sort that could manage fine with a broomstick and the moon."





CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET IN THE CHIMNEY.

THE shades of evening were gathering fast. Mrs. Raven, hastening along under them, gained her house as fast as her trembling limbs would permit. She was thankful that none of the servants were about the avenue now ; the older ones had retired to their sitting-room for rest and gossip, the younger ones were keeping lovers' trysts in the secluded glades of the park. Though the twilight outside was still golden with the last of the sunlight, the lamps were already burning in the hall, and its doors, and those of rooms opening upon it, stood wide open, in all the sweet gracious security of a pleasant

English mansion. Mrs. Raven's now half-crouching figure, with its irregular steps and outstretched, groping hand, fell upon the peaceful picture like a blot.

She went straight to her own room and shut and locked the door, which was something that, surrounded by her well-trained, ceremonious servants, she had never done before. Throwing off her bonnet, she turned to her little *étagère*, where her key-basket usually stood. It was there, but empty. Bewildered by this, she reflected for a moment, and then remembered that being alone, and keeping her own room through the day, she had never changed her dress. She still wore the black merino which was usually discarded for silk and crape before dinner. In the morning, she had slipped the bunch of keys into the pocket of this dress, and there it was still.

The words of the strange woman had seemed to indicate that some mysterious message, or warning, would be found written on one of the sheets of note-paper ("the *top* paper") which Mrs. Raven had herself put

over her laces in the drawer that same morning. If so, then it must have been there when she put it. The costly Bramah locks could not have been tampered with.

She scarcely realized what it could mean, or what she was to find. Perhaps nothing. There might be nothing to find. Of one thing she felt almost sure—that she had not put two papers into any of the drawers.

The whole thing, despite the marvellous circumstantiality of the directions, might be a take-in ; or a lucky guess, founded upon some accidentally overheard gossip that Mrs. Raven possessed such drawers.

With cold and hurrying fingers she fitted the key into the second drawer. Yes, sure enough there were two sheets of paper. She now remembered them directly. During her morning re-arrangement she had added the upper paper in this one instance that she might fold it in at the back of the drawer to guard from any dust a roll of white lace especially delicate. She drew the sheet of paper out and stood with it in her hand. The wax candles were alight in the heavy

candlesticks on her mantelshelf. But she was in no hurry now. Rather she craved a moment's respite.

Did she hear steps in the corridor, or was it her fancy? Her maid would be coming presently to take her evening instructions. She had locked her door to secure privacy, but she wished to get it open again, if possible, before anyone came to invade that privacy.

Crossing the room, and standing in front of the candle, she held up the paper close to its flame, about on a level with her own eyes.

Yes—something was growing visible! She held it closer to the candle—closer—closer. The writing was blue. Now it was quite clear: she could read it!

“If your son sends away Eldred Sloam, Evelyn Agate shall never come to Ravenscourt.”

That was all. And in her high-pitched excitement she had thrust the paper so near the light, that as she read the words upon it, it caught fire in its very centre, and she was

forced to drop it into the fender. She went down on her knees and tried to blow out the fire before all the paper was consumed. She rushed to her washstand for the water-bottle. But it was too late. There was only a little heap of ashes. And even those, in her guilty terror, she gathered into her hand, and thrust them up the chimney, out of sight.

What was it? Who was it? Who was it, inhabiting Ravenscourt, that was able to penetrate the secrets hidden within her own bosom? What should she do? Where could she go? She could not bear to remain in the familiar room, whose very furniture seemed now to be suddenly endowed with conscious life, hostile to her. She crept away to the little inner chamber where she had slept since the Squire's death, and lay down on her bed, with her face buried in the pillow.

Who could know anything about Evelyn Agate? Was it possible, she mused in her terror, that she was being made the victim of some vile conspiracy, to which that young

girl herself was a party ? The next moment she felt ashamed of the thought. She remembered that while she knew all about Evelyn, Evelyn knew nothing about her—not even of her existence. Unless Frank had chanced to see her through the medium of Philip Connell, and had made some vague mention of his mother.

Frank's mother ! And to think that Evelyn had never heard of her, unless it might be by that name ! Mrs. Raven moaned as she lay in the darkness. But—what possible connection could there be between Evelyn Agate and the peasant Eldred Sloam, that this threat should be held out to her ? The man rose up before her vision now, with his fine figure, his well-formed, bold face, and his half-genial, half-insolent manner. She knew all the gossip connected with this man, all the scandal of the bygone days.

Mrs. Raven had heard nothing of Eldred Sloam's suggested departure. If such a step were in contemplation, it must be the result of some sudden decision of her son's. How had other people heard of it ? Apart from



any self-interest, Mrs. Raven did not like the step. It had pleased her husband's trustees, and her husband later, to continue the benefits to the man that the old Squire had begun ; they had lasted so many years now that he might be excused for thinking he had a sort of right to remain on the estate. It was unwise of Leonard to put old institutions at defiance, and it was unkind. Could it have been this movement of Leonard's, which rumour might have carried to the gipsy woman's ear, which suggested the warning rhyme, spoken by her at the Pitchfork ?

The more Mrs. Raven thought of this possible action of Leonard's, the less she liked it. In what way it could affect herself in her private interest, she saw not, but she felt strangely uneasy. Would it be in her power to turn Leonard from his will—and that when she dared give him no reason for personally wishing it ? Anyway, she must try to do so.

But all this was beside the question. The invisible writing on the sheet of paper—how did it come there ? It was she herself who

had sent Charity Hale to fetch the paper from her desk downstairs in the morning, giving her the key to unlock the drawer where it had been kept since black-edged paper had been substituted for dainty monograms. She remembered that Charity had been quick on her errand, for she had thought at the time how active the old woman was still. Surely Charity could not have had anything to do with this !

Just at the very moment when she had resolved to act as if everything was as simple and straightforward as it appeared on the surface, she found herself caught by some inexplicable power, which seemed to detect her unspoken motives, and to use them as a means of compassing its own secret ends. Who was this strange woman—and was she this inexplicable power in her own person, or only its agent ? And what had she to do with Evelyn ? Anything ?

How came the deserted child, Evelyn, to have found its way to the Agates' house ? And as that name passed through her thoughts, a blush, almost a girlish blush,



burned on her cheek. Again, if all her suspicions were true (and now they seemed to her to be no longer jealous fears but menacing facts, though she resolved to die rather than breathe them again), whence did Frank derive what Leonard truly called "the Raven face."

But the manner of the writing's appearance affected Mrs. Raven's nerves scarcely more than its disappearance, which yet she knew well enough to be due to nothing but her own excited eagerness. She now began to feel as if what she had seen had been but the hallucination of her own heated brain. She slipped off the bed, went softly back to her boudoir, and put her hand up the chimney. Yes, there was the charred paper. At least, she had not imagined the incident : why, therefore, should she think she had imagined the words ? How had they come on the paper, and who had written them ? And, in sheer lack of any other outlet for suspicion, she turned it again on Charity.

There was soot on her white hands : and while she was washing it off with hasty

disgust, a knock came to the door. She cried, "Come in," and only remembered it was locked when she heard the handle fruitlessly turned : and she unlocked it hastily. It was but Janet Mackay come about her usual duties. Mrs. Raven went back to her bed, and lay down. She felt alone in the whole world, nay, in the whole universe ; and she cowered into the darkness as if in hopes there to be alone, even from herself.

"I'm afraid you are not well, ma'am," said the Scotch maid kindly.

"I think I am not, Janet," she answered : "at any rate, I feel very faint and tired. I think I will go to bed." And as she rose languidly to undress, she inquired whether Mr. Raven had returned.

"No, ma'am," answered Janet. "Budd does not expect him yet."

"Will you tell Mr. Raven I wish to speak with him here when he comes in, Janet ? I wish to speak with him particularly," she added. "Did you get through your work this morning ?"

Now, Janet's work that morning had been

the sewing of fresh lace on sundry occasional tables and brackets in the drawing-rooms. Janet answered that she had quite finished it.

"Do you remember if Charity fetched anything from the drawing-room while you were there?" asked her mistress.

Janet reflected. It is not easy to recall, at a moment's notice, the comings and goings of those who come and go about us every day. But Janet's memory served her.

"Yes, ma'am," she said; "Charity went to the cabinet in the back drawing-room, and took away some paper."

"Was she long in doing it?"

"Just half a minute, ma'am, as it seemed to me."

"That is all right," said Mrs. Raven evasively, feeling terribly that it (or that something) was all wrong.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Janet, holding up the garment her mistress had taken off, "there seems a smell of soot about this dress! Ah! here it is, all over the white cuff! How can it have got there? Could I have flicked the sleeve into the grate as I shook it?"

"Oh, never mind," cried Mrs. Raven, dropping into a chair, and feeling as if a volume of cold water was engulfing her. "Never mind that, Janet. Help me to bed, and bring me a glass of wine."

"Don't you think a drop of brandy might be better, ma'am?" said the servant compassionately. "It will revive you best."

"Anything you like," said Mrs. Raven, "only bring it—and leave me—and don't let me be disturbed till my son comes home."

The maid obeyed in alarmed silence. She brought as large a glass of brandy as she thought it reasonable for a lady to drink, especially one so abstemious as Mrs. Raven. Her mistress swallowed it at a mouthful, and lay down with her face to the wall.

Janet Mackay shaded the candles, closed the door softly, and went back to her fellow-servants. "The mistress was poorly the night," she said, in the quaint idiom which she had kept through many years of English residence.

"Maybe she's walked too far this evening," suggested Sims.

"She seems worried," said Janet; "and a bit put about, as if she'd lost something, maybe. She wants the Squire to go to her directly he comes in. She asked whether you had been moving anything in the drawing-room to-day, Charity; and whether you were long about it."

"She did, did she?" retorted Charity, in a tone of defiance. And the next minute she got up and went away.

James Sloam chanced to be present. He had some dim idea of a relationship between the old woman and himself. At any rate, she had been kind to him in his neglected childhood. But she kept him down, and he did not care to speak much before her. As soon as she closed the door his tongue was at liberty.

"The mistress took her walk to the Pitchfork this evening," he began to the others. "She went to tell them they ought not to keep the likes of that clear-voyer on respectable licensed premises. Old Worsfold got into a rare fright when he saw her come up——"

"How do you know this, James?" interrupted Mrs. Sims.

"Giles told me, ma'am; I saw him just now in the lane. And it was very awkward, he says; for while Mrs. Raven stood trimming Worsfold and his wife about harbouring the woman, she came down right upon 'em. There was a bit of a shindy among 'em, and the mistress here she walked away with her head up; and the clear-voyer, taking the change out of her gold piece, and wishing 'em a good day, followed after her. She put herself right in her path, and stood staring her in the face, and then whispered something to her and gave her head a nod, and went off by way of the cross-roads. Giles was peeping round the corner of the milking-shed, and he saw Mrs. Raven's face go ghastly white, and her lips begin to tremble. I think that must be an awful woman."

"Why, what could she have said to the mistress!" exclaimed Janet Mackay, breaking the silence which the news had caused. "This is what must have turned her queer."

"Ah, the gentry pretend not to believe

in these things," commented Sims ; "but they do believe in 'em when they are brought near."

Charity Hale came back to her seat. Nobody paid any heed to her, or they might have noticed the slightly tighter pursing of her thin lips, which in Charity was always a sign of triumph.

Charity had been upstairs to pay Mrs. Raven a visit. She had found the boudoir lights dimly burning, the door communicating with the bedroom open, and the bedroom in semi-darkness.

"I'm afraid you're ill, madam," she said, standing in the doorway. "Janet seemed to think you were worried, looking for something you could not find. Might I be able to help you?"

"No, no ; it is nothing, Charity," said Mrs. Raven faintly.

"I hope I haven't put anything wrong," observed Charity. "Janet said you were asking if I'd been in the drawing-room to-day. I only went there when you told me, madam, to get that paper for the drawers. I had to

open a new packet of that paper—I hope I wasn't wrong in that?"

"Oh no, Charity, quite right," said Mrs. Raven. "I only fancied—well—I mean I only thought something had got out of its place."

"Eh! I do hate things getting lost," said Charity. "It makes one feel as if there was a thief about the house. And if there's a thief to the fore, steal he will, though it be things of no value to any but their owner."

Charity's tone was civil—nay, almost abject. But Mrs. Raven writhed on her couch in the dark.

"Charity," she cried, "why should you grow suspicious over every trifle? Nothing has been lost. I am very ill and sorrowful, Charity. I do not wish to conceal that from you—I couldn't, perhaps, if I would; but you must not think I am blaming you, or anybody else. One may feel sad and distressed sometimes, almost causelessly."

"I'm afraid your walk this evening was too much for you, madam," said the old woman, in quite another tone.

"Perhaps it was," sighed Mrs. Raven, catching at the excuse.

"I'm sorry if I've disturbed you, madam. I've scarcely ever heard you so faint-like. There's something in your voice that 'minds me of the time after Master Frank was born, and I nursed ye, and ye were too sick-like to even take any pride in the baby. You and old Charity have been through a good deal together.—Well, good-night, madam," added Charity, after a lengthened silence. "I hope you'll sleep well, and be better in the morning."

Mrs. Raven was still lying as Charity had left her, when Leonard, in obedience to the request conveyed to him, came up. Like most sickly people, he shrank from the presence of pain or suffering of any kind, almost resenting it.

"Well, mother," was his greeting, "what is the matter? What do you want me for? I hope you are not ill." Like Charity, he did not advance into the darkened room, but paused at the door.

"Come in, Leonard," said his mother, in a

weak, muffled voice. "Come in, and sit here beside me."

He obeyed ungraciously, sitting down on a chair about a yard from the couch; but he stretched out no caressing finger towards the poor hands writhing within his reach. He had inherited his mother's cold nature, and been bred in his mother's ways. He was her other self, and now she found there was no comfort in him.

"Any news?" she asked.

"News—no," he answered. "And you are better without news, mother, if you are ill. It is no news, I'm sure, that I find everything everywhere in a dreadfully loose and neglected condition. But I'll soon put matters straight enough."

"Leonard," she said, "do not be too hasty. Do not be too severe on the poor people for ways into which your father's easy habits led them."

"They must all go," he said, hardly. "It is bad enough to have patience with the result of old-fashioned farming, without bothering one's self with old-fashioned labourers into the

bargain. To-morrow I discharge the first on the list—though he can hardly be called a labourer—that Eldred Sloam.”

Mrs. Raven half raised herself.

“Eldred Sloam has been long on the land, Leonard.”

“Too long.”

“Have you mentioned to anybody your intention to dismiss him?” she resumed, eagerly seeking for a clue which might lead her to the source of her mysterious warning.

“No—why do you ask?” returned Leonard, getting surprised.

“Are you quite sure you have not mentioned it to anybody?” she urged. “I want you to think before you answer me.”

“I am quite sure I have not mentioned it to—stay,” broke off Leonard—“I remember now. I did mention it to Mr. Toynbee on Saturday, when he was taking lunch here.”

“Do you think he has mentioned it again?”

“I think not—for certain. As he does not, I fancy, altogether approve of some of

my contemplated changes, he would be little likely to talk of them. But why do you ask?"

"Oh, for nothing," she answered carelessly. "Leonard, I am going to crave a favour of you. Do not send Eldred Sloam away."

"Well, really, mother, this is too absurd!" cried Leonard, not angrily, not even harshly, but much as he might have answered a child who preferred a troublesome and unreasonable request. "You are getting some other strange fancy into your head in place of the one your London journey drove out of it."

"I don't often ask anything of you, Leonard," she wailed, "but let this man stay. Your father let him stay. You—you of course know who this man is said to be, Leonard; that he has Raven blood in his veins."

"Shall I give you my opinion, mother—that he never ought to have been tolerated on the estate at all. When shameful things happen they should be hidden away out of sight."

"You are right. But it was not done."



Here the man has been, and here he is ; and it will be cruel to uproot him now. Ill character though he may be, he is to be pitied. He is not a Raven, of course ; but——”

“ I should think not,” scornfully spoke Leonard. “ Not a Raven ! You are not carrying your changeling theories back for a generation or two, I should hope, mother.”

“ Leonard,” said his mother with sudden dignity, “ you blamed me for having allowed one fancy to grow to gigantic proportions in secrecy and silence. Do not, therefore, blame me for speaking now. Call this a fancy if you will, but the instinctive feeling against it lies too strongly within me to be flung aside. If you will not listen to my prayer, you must to my command—forgive me for presuming, Leonard. I desire that Eldred Sloam should remain where your father left him.”

“ Well, I won’t speak to him to-morrow, at any rate,” Leonard answered, with that sort of indulgent indifference with which nurses assent to the ravings of delirium. “ Will that satisfy you ? I can’t promise more than that. He shall stay on for the present.”

"And you will not dismiss him even later on, without giving me due warning?" she eagerly urged.

"Very well, mother, I will also promise that."

"Thank you, Leonard," she said, her tone trembling with emotion, "thank you, very heartily. Even if you think you err, you will not regret erring for once on the side of mercy at your mother's request."

Leonard wished her good-night, and went away wondering. "It is indeed high time she got a companion," he mused. "I begin to think my father's death gave her a greater shock than I thought. Seems to me that her brain must be giving way!"





CHAPTER XIV.

MARY DAVIES'S ACCIDENT.

FRANK RAVEN dragged on his weary weeks in London. Philip Connell could not understand him at all. Philip's own plan of life was to work by night and trifle about through the day, earning by various spasmodic sorts of literary labours, not enough to pay his way, but enough to maintain a certain credit, and so keep his debts steadily on the increase. That an end must come to such ways of life, Philip would have admitted, if pressed : but, as he said one day, "There's no need to look round the corner for trouble."

"No," Frank rejoined, "not if you take care to walk in the opposite direction."

"It is no use brooding," Philip would say, "and in your case it is folly to do it. There might be some excuse for me, if I did so. It would be a stiff pull on the governor if he had to pay my debts, as he would do if he knew of them ; though I keep that dark, and my duns never dream of it. But you—you are a rich man, Frank. Not to say that the old lady——"

"My mother," interrupted Frank.

"Not to say that your mother would certainly do the handsome thing for you at once, if you managed well," Philip went on, heedless of any rebuking spirit in Frank ; "but you might help yourself by borrowing on the fortune which must be yours some day."

"At my mother's death," said Frank again, with a quivering lip.

"Well, everybody must die," observed Philip, with philosophy, "and our parents go before ourselves in the order of nature."

"Philip," said Frank, with simple earnestness, "I am not a rich man : I would rather not touch one farthing from home, if I

can possibly do without it. But I shall not borrow money on my expectations. I must get work of some sort, and that soon. I don't expect I'm up to much : but surely I can do a little and eke out my hundred pounds. And I can't go on living with you always ; at least, not without sharing expenses."

Philip respected his distress, and not for worlds would he have hinted that Frank was benefiting, just now, not by money out of his own pocket, but by a steady increase of that wonderful mountain of debt which must certainly descend in an avalanche some day.

One morning later on, the letter for which Frank had vaguely watched lay before him. Its thick vellum envelope, deep black edge and heavy seal, made it conspicuous among the little light notes and blue missives addressed to his cousin.

Mrs. Raven had written what was, for her, quite a long letter. Two sheets of note-paper were covered by her large, flowing handwriting. And yet she seemed to have very

little to say, and Frank scarcely knew whether he was gratified or disappointed.

“MY DEAR BOY,

“I am longing to know when your London visit comes to an end. Ravenscourt has seemed very empty this harvest-time, with your dear father gone and you away. But I must not selfishly call you from pleasures and interests suitable to your age, and from the agreeable society of our kind nephew, Philip Connell. Only I shall be glad to see you when you care to come. My loneliness has been great, and I have resolved to engage a companion. I advertised in some of the London papers, and have had many answers. One of them I fancied more than the rest, and have since been in correspondence with the young lady. I think she will suit me: but as it is necessary that any permanent arrangement should be based upon a personal liking on both sides, I have invited her to pay me a trial visit. If we suit each other, her presence here will save you from any dutiful compunctions on the score of absence, and yet may



make your home-comings more cheery. I am told she is a good musician. I don't think there is any other news from Raven, but of course I could not think of making such a change as this in the house without letting you know of it at once. My compliments to Philip, and I am, my dear boy,

“YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.”

“I think my mother likes me better while I am away than when I am present,” said Frank within himself, but he made no such reflection aloud. To Philip he only said that his mother was on the eve of engaging a young lady as companion.

“What a pity Mrs. Raven did not tell us this beforehand; we might have recommended Evelyn Agate,” remarked Philip, as he opened his own letters. “I suppose she has done it in a hurry.”

“In a hurry, at last,” said Frank. “But I think she must have spoken about it for some time; old Charity mentioned something of the sort to me before I left home.”

“Whew!” whistled Philip, scanning one of

his notes. "What do you think this is, Frank? A letter from Miss Agate, inviting us to go to her place this evening to say good-bye to Evelyn, who is off to Ravenscourt to pay a visit to its mistress, with a view to becoming her companion."

"What an extraordinary thing!" exclaimed Frank.

Philip nodded, and continued reading from Miss Agate's letter: "From the coincidence of names and places, we cannot help thinking the lady must be either actually your friend's mother, or else some connection of the family at present resident in his home. Ask him to come with you. This makes it easier for me to let Evelyn go. She is bearing the thought of this change in life very bravely."

"You little humbug!" Philip apostrophized, alluding to Evelyn. "Does she humbug herself into that belief, as neatly as she humbugs you?—Evelyn 'bearing bravely,'—what has she to bear, dear imaginative Miss Agate? Any day she would change you and your big brain and warm heart, for a diamond

bracelet or a purse of money. And she has a better chance of picking up those where she's going than where she is."

Frank laughed.

"Ah," commented Philip. "She will ask you some sly little questions to-night about your brother. Mark my words if she doesn't, Frank. She asked me about *you* the other night, and I told her you were entirely dependent on your mother, and stopped short of even saying 'while she lived.' For she's a long-sighted one, is Miss Evelyn, and you are rather green! Shall you like her for a sister-in-law?"

"Don't be silly, Philip."

"*I* should not care for her even for a cousin-in-law, I can tell you that. And I tell you now, Frank, that you may not cry out sour grapes upon me when she becomes Lady of Ravenscourt."

"Oh!" said Frank, "I thought you seemed to admire her very much: I overheard you paying her all sorts of compliments."

"Well," answered Philip carelessly, "when

you have to draw the long bow in order to be civil at all, you may as well draw it pretty wide."

They started for Miss Agate's in the evening. It was the third time Frank had been there. The incongruousness of the surroundings, which had so mystified him at first, had worn off. He knew now who and what he was going to see ; and he looked at the crowded squalid streets, and the bare old houses, understanding how Gertrude Agate saw them and loved them and lived among them. This was not the sort of woman one finds in the conventional mansion with a back and front drawing-room and a butler's pantry. Special natures have their habitats, quite as distinctly as flowers.

There had been some preparation for their coming, for the parlour curtains—of some richly tinted stuff, though rather worn and faded—were drawn, and faintly illumined by a lamp burning within. The servant, Mary Davies, showed them into the presence of the two ladies. A pretty tea-service was already set, and though Miss Agate was her

old self in her clinging black dress and plain frills, Evelyn had blossomed from her heavy velveteen into a creamy cashmere, set off with olive-green ribbon, which also twined in her rich chestnut hair.

She left her hand in Frank's for a moment as he greeted her. "Is it not strange that I should be going to your people?" was all she said, and there was a sort of confiding appeal in her voice, which might have touched the youth's sympathy but for his conviction that Philip, just behind him, was laughing in his sleeve.

"Yes, it is strange," interposed Gertrude, "and only proves what I always say, that the world is but a small place. And this seems to have happened so opportunely—as if it were purposed. The very same day that Evelyn was expecting her advertisement to appear, she took up the newspaper and saw one in it, a very nice one, from a lady wanting a companion, and she wrote at once. Now that I see you here, Mr. Raven, Evelyn's going to your mother makes me feel that she will be among friends."

"I have made up my mind to make friends wherever I go," cried Evelyn.

"Please to remember that Mrs. Raven is my aunt as well as Frank's mother," remarked Philip. "Does not that recommend her equally well? I believe nobody ever recollects that I am related to anybody but myself."

"Oh, to be sure—certainly," cried Evelyn. "Then how does the relationship come in? Mrs. Raven must be——"

"Mrs. Raven is the widow of my mother's brother," explained Philip.

"Mr. Connell," said Miss Agate, "you are quite right in saying that nobody—nobody, at least, as far as I am concerned—ever thinks of you in relation to your family."

"Oh, there are so many of us," answered Philip lightly. "We have to stretch out our affection to make it go round. There are four at home, three girls and one boy, and there are six away: two girls married, I in London, Jack in Demerara, Sidney in Halifax, and William somewhere on the high seas. We can't all write each other a weekly

letter, and if one is honoured by it, the rest are jealous, so we are all impartially silent. I go home two or three times a year, and when I'm coming away I say to the mater, 'Remember, no news is good news: you'll hear directly anything goes wrong.' It would be awful for her to be always expecting six letters: she would never get through the stocking-basket."

"That is the sensible way to look at matters," assented Evelyn, pouring out the tea. "Of what use are letters? When I was away at school I had often to give up a walk, or some such enjoyment, for the sake of the weekly letter that Gertrude insisted on. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Raven?"

"No, I don't," said Frank bluntly. "I wish I had somebody that I felt sure would care for a weekly letter from me."

"I am with you, Mr. Raven," said Miss Agate; "I am with you entirely."

"Well, I don't know," contended Evelyn. "I think a great deal of love is only a nuisance altogether. There is Mary Davies now, with *her* love—just because she nursed

me! She has developed a new form of distress. Formerly she wept that I should go away at all. Now she weeps that I am going to Ravenstoke, and assures me the place is bad."

"What does she know about Ravenstoke?" asked Frank, rather piqued to hear any aspersion cast on his beloved village.

"Of course she knows nothing," answered Evelyn: "wherever I had been going it would have been the same. She's an Alstock woman, and she says she has been in Ravenstoke (which is very likely—the places are not more than twelve miles apart, I believe), and that the Ravenstoke people are bad people. As she may possibly have found them, classing with the hedgers and ditchers."

"I think all the Raven people are fairly respectable," spoke Frank, inclined to stand up for the humblest peasant in the place. "There must be a few worthless characters, as there are everywhere; but they are so well looked after, that they don't do much harm. The most disreputable man in it is—but never mind," broke off Frank.

"Nay, let us hear the disreputable man's name!" cried Evelyn. "Perhaps he may be one of Davies's old acquaintances. It will be fun to tell her we know the name of her respectable friend."

Frank felt as if he hated the smooth, bright girl, with her sweet, hard voice, and her heartless words.

"The man's name is Eldred Sloam," he said coldly. "He is in our employment, when he chooses to do any work, and lives on the estate. I should not wonder, though, if Leonard were to turn him off: he does not like him. Mr. Toynbee——"

"Who is Mr. Toynbee?" interrupted Evelyn.

"Mr. Toynbee is the vicar," Frank answered; and there he cut the conversation short by turning to Miss Agate, and beginning upon a very different subject.

Evelyn gave her head a slight toss; it did not escape the quick eye of Philip Connell, and he prepared to devote himself to her entertainment. Perhaps he liked her less than Frank did: certainly he could better

have given reasons for his dislike. But he liked amusing himself, and he liked studying human nature. Philip Connell had once kept snakes in his chambers, and had written several magazine articles about them.

"Was Frank giving you an account of the beauties of Ravenstoke, and the virtues of its inhabitants?" he asked, dropping into the chair beside Evelyn, and speaking as if he had been deaf to their recent conversation.

"I put to him a question or two," returned Evelyn. "Of course, everything about Ravenstoke is interesting to me now. But I fear I wearied him, as he is gone in search of more improving conversation. Is your cousin very fond of improving his mind, Mr. Connell?"

"It is to be devoutly hoped so," answered Philip, with a glance intended to convey to Evelyn the unspoken words—"for he needs it." "Perhaps I can enlighten you upon some of the matters you would like to know, Miss Evelyn."

"How large is the family, then?" asked

Evelyn, in an undertone. "There is this one—I conclude—and Mrs. Raven, of course; and—an elder brother?"

Philip nodded.

"An elder brother, of course; or Frank," glancing at him, "could not be the younger son."

"Is he at home? Does he live at the Court?"

"Certainly: it is Leonard's own house," said Philip. "He is the reigning squire now."

"And there are no other children—no more younger brothers?" she went on.

"No; only Frank. You will find Ravenscourt a beautiful house, Miss Evelyn. And the estate is a good estate. And the genealogy is a long genealogy. Everything is as it should be."

"Ah! but what can that signify to the poor hired companion?" she sighed. "*She* should rest satisfied with the security of her salary and the comfort of her private apartment."

And while they carried on this skirmishing, Miss Agate and Frank were chatting seriously.

He had touched and warmed her heart by inquiring after her unseen brother. Few of her visitors did so.

"How is Mr. Agate to-day?" Frank had said, in his shy, pleasant voice. And she looked up at him surprised, with grateful eyes.

"He is very well indeed—for him. I was able to give him a pleasure which he appreciated this morning. Look!" and she stretched out her hand for a small volume, daintily bound in white vellum, which lay on a side-table. "This is a book which my brother brought out years ago. It is a collection of old Latin hymns translated by him into English verse. It was his labour of love while he was working as a tutor. And this is a new edition—fresh this week. You should have seen his face when I put it into his hand. And I am so proud of it, too! The hymns are very beautiful, and Theodore had real gifts as a translator, so the contents are worthy of the beautiful binding."

Frank held it in his hand, turning over the leaves, and carefully reading the title-page.

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It was the publisher's name and address which he wished to see.

"My mother wrote to me this morning," he said presently, "telling me that she had invited a young lady to visit her. Little did she think I had the pleasure of knowing the household from which she comes. I should like to send a letter and a parcel to my mother by Miss Evelyn's hands. It would please her."

"Certainly. Evelyn will take it for you."

"What are you promising in my name?" interrupted Evelyn.

"Only that you will carry down a little packet from Mr. Frank to his mother," explained the elder lady.

"Oh, surely," cried Evelyn. "I start by the noonday train to-morrow. How shall I get the parcel? It is a long journey from Mr. Connell's chambers here. The railway station itself would be nearer, Mr. Frank."

She was not at all unwilling that so presentable a young man should appear as her escort on the platform. Such meetings and partings are tender times, and leave more definite

memories than a dozen ordinary social opportunities. Not that she was in the least attracted to Frank: nay, she was rather repelled. But Evelyn Agate was concerned in doing the best for Evelyn Agate, and Evelyn Agate's heart and feelings must give place to mercenary computations.

"I should think nothing of the walk here," said Frank, "only I shall have to make ready the parcel to-morrow. So I will meet you at the station, Miss Evelyn, without fail."

Mary Davies had entered the room with some preparation for the supper, which, in honour of Evelyn's "last night at home," and the invited presence of two guests, was to be rather less simple than usual. The small, pale, clean-looking woman, with the anxious look in her face, spread the table without once lifting her eyes to the two gentlemen, and having done her duty, would have retired in silence, but that Evelyn called her, just as she had her hand upon the door.

"Davies!" she said, in that musically metallic voice which Frank could not endure, "was one Eldred Sloam among your old

friends at Ravenstoke ? And was he a good man, or a bad one ?”

The woman's short answer was inaudible. It was only one word, but whether it was “yes” or “no,” or but some short exclamation, nobody could tell. She left the room hurriedly.

“Evelyn, you should not tease Mary. She——”

Miss Agate's reproof was cut off by the sound of a heavy fall outside. They ran to the rescue. Mary Davies had slipped her foot on the kitchen stairs, and was below in the corner. But when Philip picked her up, it was quite clear that no limbs were broken, or even sprained. She declared she was not hurt, not at all. Her face was very white, and her hands shook violently. “It was only ‘shock,’” she said. She would just keep quiet for a bit, if the ladies would excuse her.

So they waited on themselves at supper, and there was little special conversation. Evelyn laughed at Miss Agate's hint that her ill-timed remark, being spoken before

company, might have disconcerted Davies and caused her to lose her footing.

This especially amused Evelyn. "The very idea, Aunt Gertrude! As if people, servants especially, could be so easily put out!"

"Don't you love that sweet young woman dearly, cousin mine?" asked Philip, as he passed his arm through Frank's, for the walk homewards. "And what is the gift you are going to send to your mother, if I may ask?"

"I mean to get that beautiful new edition of Mr. Agate's translation of the Latin hymns," readily answered Frank. "I think my mother will be pleased with that." And in his own mind Frank added a few words: "Such a gift will show her that I am neither hardened nor indifferent, though I do not go home. I never shall go, I think. It is hard to know there's no love for you anywhere in this wide world."

And somehow there flitted through his mind a thought of the stranger girl whom he had met in the moonlit lanes. She was lonely too. But, of course, everybody would love her. Only whom would she love?



CHAPTER XV.

THE VICAR'S PUZZLE.

THE next morning was hot and sultry. Frank arrived at the station in very good time, and so had to wait alone in its closeness and dust. He almost thought that Evelyn meant to lose her train. But no, just at the last moment the little party appeared, Evelyn stepping first, very fresh and trim, Miss Agate toiling behind, looking a little nervous, like a person who has been worried by keeping others up to a necessary mark. She was burdened by sundry hand-bags and parasols, of which Frank hastened to relieve her. And last of all came Mary Davies, superintending a white wrapped portmanteau.

"I thought it would do us both a good turn if I brought Davies," Miss Agate said, shaking hands with Frank; "she will be the better for the ride in the cab, after her fall, and for the unaccustomed scene. And she was so pleased at the chance of seeing the last of Evelyn."

Davies was hanging on that young woman's movements with timid deprecation, anxiety in her eyes and regret in her face.

"Is it not delightful to find it one's duty to travel first-class?" said Evelyn to Frank, as she took her seat. "Ah, you know nothing of these feelings. These are pleasurable sensations reserved for poor people."

"I don't know," returned Frank, with ~~blat~~ blunt sincerity. "When we were at school, my father only allowed us third-class fares: he thought anything else ridiculous luxury for boys. In truth I don't think there's much difference. Nothing signifies to healthy people."

"Ah, that is because you do whichever you like, from choice and not from necessity," said Evelyn.

"Not altogether," interposed Gertrude. "It does not matter much to me, either : and I travel third-class from necessity. At least almost from necessity. There is always so much else to be done with one's money, when one hasn't much."

"Well, some people have different instincts from others," said Evelyn. "And when those instincts have long lain ungratified, their gratification is a very conscious delight. It is part of my nature to love things sweet and soft and pleasant. It may be hereditary, you know," she laughed, "since I do not know who I am. At any rate, Mr. Frank, you must envy me my beautiful journey to your own dear home. I suppose I shall see you there soon?"

"Perhaps not," answered Frank gravely. "I may not be at Raven for a long time."

"I shall not tell your mother that you say so," said Evelyn : "for I am sure you do not mean it."

And then the whistle sounded and the train was whirled away.

Miss Agate and Frank exchanged a few

words and parted, Frank going his way, thinking much more of his parcel and of its destination than of its bearer. Gertrude and her attendant returned home, talking of Evelyn, timing the points of her progress, and trying to imagine what she would be feeling and doing. They never hit the truth. For she was soon sound asleep! She drank her little flask of wine and ate her biscuits almost before the train had crossed the last archway spanning London streets, and then composed herself for a nap. What were the villages she would pass through? Only dull places. What was the ancient forest she would cross? Only trees. Miss Agate would have admitted that her *protégée* was a little frivolous, perhaps a little unfeeling—nay, even a little selfish. But she never guessed that these dubious attributes, which she kindly set down to the ebb and flow of a yet unsettled character, were really only the natural product of a shallow, hard, and low nature.

James Sloam and the pony-chaise awaited the young lady at Raven Station. Evelyn

alighted in high spirits. She had often envied such a scene as that in which she now figured. The dark trees of the ancestral house in the background, the lingering inquisitive villagers, the neat little equipage ; and her own dainty figure at the very front and centre of the stage. She was quite affable to James : yet the boy reported her later as "an awful fine lady." For which Mrs. Sims reproved him.

"The lad takes after his poor mother in more than her plain face," whispered she to Janet Mackay. "*She* was always taking brass for gold if it was done up ornamental."

Mrs. Raven came into the hall, and met the girl on the threshold. Beyond this action itself there was nothing warm in her reception. It was singularly quiet ; as lacking in the chilly forms of civility as in the kindlier utterances of genuine hospitality.

Evelyn did not straightway give her Frank's packet then, though she had it in her reticule. Her acquaintance with the son of Ravenscourt was too striking a point to be thrust bluntly forward, and perhaps passed over in

a hurry. She would go to her own room first; then, refreshed and trim, return to Mrs. Raven, bearing her son's gift in her hand.

Her quick glance satisfied herself in an instant that the room to which she was led was all that could be desired. The old-fashioned dormitories of Ravenscourt might not be very lofty, but they were large and bright, with white dimity hangings and fresh carpets and bright chintzes. There were flowers on the toilet-table, flowers on the mantel-shelf, flowers everywhere.

"The mistress hopes very much that you will like your room. She was in here looking over it the moment before you came."

This speech called Evelyn's notice to the attendant who had followed her in. It was Charity Hale, and Evelyn liked neither her nor her address. The old woman's words were harmless enough, but they had no respectful prefix, and Evelyn detected something of familiarity in her tone, and of mockery in her small, peering eye. Evelyn thought

she could not do better than at once teach her her place.

"Oh, I did not notice you before," she said, looking the old woman up and down. "I am glad you are here, for I am very tired. Draw off my boots, please."

"Aye, sure," said Charity. "Only I'm that stiff, that if I kneel down, I don't know how I'm to get on my feet again."

"Oh, never mind, then," answered the baffled Evelyn.

"The younger women have all got their own work, ye see," commented Charity, quite serenely. "But the mistress will hire another to wait upon ye, likely—if you stay. It's no fit task for a poor old body like me."

Evelyn felt that there were insolent meanings in her words, and her face burned.

"I shall be able to help myself," she said, with resolved quietness. "Thank you. You may go."

Charity withdrew without a word. And when Evelyn had finished her toilet, and ventured out of her room, feeling quite irresistible in a sea-green muslin robe, trimmed

with white frills, she found herself rather at a loss which way to turn. For Ravenscourt was built on an old-fashioned plan, and was full of short corridors and corners and turns. However, after a few moments' bewildered wandering, she encountered a homely-looking, respectful female servant, who volunteered to lead her to the apartment where Mrs. Raven was likely to be.

Mrs. Raven was there, but she was not alone. Seated in an armchair, quite comfortably, was an elderly clergyman, whom Evelyn guessed rightly to be the Vicar. She was not sorry that her little story about Frank should have so eligible an auditor.

"I have something for you, madam," she said, addressing Mrs. Raven. "For I have had the pleasure of seeing young Mr. Raven in London. His cousin, Mr. Philip Connell, is a great friend of my adopted aunt, Miss Agate. Your son was good enough to entrust this to my keeping." And she handed the parcel to the widow, allowing her own hands to linger on it for a moment, after the mother's had taken it.

What a strange, quiet woman this Mrs. Raven was, was Evelyn's reflection. For she only looked up with a quick, significant glance at her, and said, "Oh! thank you," as if it was the most natural thing in the world that her son should be on speaking terms with her unknown, hired companion. It seemed to Evelyn almost as if the words did not reach the lady's mind for some time after they had entered her ear. For there was a long pause before she added: "I am glad Frank has seen you. Now he will not think of his home as haunted by a strange figure."

Mr. Toynbee had heard Evelyn's announcement with apparently much stronger interest. He had observed Evelyn intently from the moment she entered the room. Not because she was a pretty girl, though the good Vicar had a kindly eye for pretty girls, just as he had for his roses, or for any other fresh, sweet things. But it struck him that he had seen her somewhere before. When his eyes first rested on her, some old memory had started into sudden life and then sank down, utterly dormant. Was it her face that he knew?

Or the face of somebody like her? And under what circumstances had he previously seen her, or this resembling face? Odder still, two different associations seemed to mix, the one having an atmosphere of interest and pity: the other of dislike and repulsion.

"Ah! the world is very small, after all," said the Vicar, in his cheery tones. "If one went to the backwoods of the west, or the northern territory of Australia, one would find that one's next-door neighbour was acquainted with one's mother's cousin, and knew all about one's uncle's bankruptcy."

Evelyn turned and looked at him with a faint smile, but said nothing. She thought of her own history, so unsuspected by him, and how, if it is impossible to lose one's self, she could prove it was quite possible to be lost. The reflection gave a touch of pathos to her face, and again the Vicar's gentler memory almost leaped into form, but again sank and eluded him.

Mrs. Raven had taken her son's gift from its paper wrappings. There it was, the

dainty vellum-clad book, "Hymns Translated from the Latin, by Theodore Agate." She stood and looked at it—and a vision out of her past life, woodland scenes she had not seen for years, rose in her mind, and voices she would never hear again rang in her ears. She wondered why some women can faint and fall when the cold finger of despair touches their hearts, while others stand still, only the more erect and calm for his chill grasp. She wondered why those seem able to die when agony reaches its culminating point, while it only serves to stimulate the tide of vitality in these.

What did Frank know of that past?—*anything?*—or why had he sent her this book? Was everybody hunting her down—running swords into her heart to force her to cry out? Or was it all chance—all done unconsciously? Was it only something in her own soul which gave significance to recent events? A weird story of her childhood came floating through her brain, wherein a man who had slain another heard his shriek in the song of birds, saw his grave in every

swelling turf, and his name in the veins of every leaf.

There had once been a spot of romance in the dull life of Mrs. Raven: a point from which she might have developed into a being very different from the dreary, conventional woman she was now. That early romance had come to nothing. It did not make it any easier to bear that there was nobody to blame but herself. She never had blamed herself; or thought herself worthy of blame. She had thrown the blame on the laws of society, on the conventional rulings of the world, which do not allow a well-born young lady to throw herself away upon one deemed ineligible. Yet, half-unconsciously to herself, that blighted romance had remained her pleasantest memory; a sort of refuge for her starved and stunted heart.

Such were Mrs. Raven's thoughts and feelings, through which the voices of Mr. Toynbee and Evelyn reached her, as a song in the street might reach a prisoner in a condemned cell. She heard the Vicar ask after Frank, and how he was looking, and

whether he seemed enjoying his London visit. And then the Vicar rose to go, for it suddenly occurred to him that he might be one too many on the scene, when the new inmate had just arrived, and that Mrs. Raven's strange silence and indifference might be her method of hinting this to him.

However, he had scarcely passed out of the room, before Mrs. Raven stood, with her book in her hand, and spoke to Evelyn. "I feel singularly tired and faint this afternoon. You will not think me inhospitable if I retire to rest for a while? I am not often thus."

"Dear Mrs. Raven!" cried Evelyn, "I am here to relieve you from burdens—not to add another!" She had caught the trick of proud humility from many a better soul among her aunt's guests.

Something like a tear glistened in the widow's pale eyes. "You are a good girl," she said. "You will find books—and please call the servants to show you anything or tell you anything you wish."

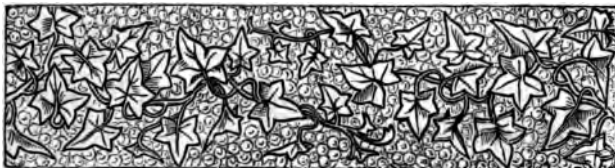
And as she passed out of the room, she paused before Evelyn and laid her cold thin

fingers over the girl's warm hand, and folded them so for a moment.

"I'm afraid it won't be lively here," reflected Evelyn. "I don't wonder Mr. Frank made his escape. But it is easier to bear with tears and sentimentalities for a good salary than out of mere family affection! I'll try to put up with it—until I've saved some money, at any rate."

The good Vicar was half sorry to have curtailed his visit. Evelyn's face had so "bothered" him, that he would fain have watched it longer, to see whether any fresh or varying expression might aid him in the will-o'-the-wisp memories which started from the past only to elude his grasp.





CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRANGER IN THE TRAIN.

I THINK I'm getting home-sick," Philip Connell announced to Frank, one morning. "What do you say if we both take a run down to Colburn, and see my old folks and the girls?"

Frank looked up from his coffee, but said nothing.

"Next week will be Michaelmas," continued Philip. "It looks well to go out of town at the regulation holiday times. Seems to people as if one was in the swim, though the fact is that I'm generally busier in holiday times than at any other season."

"How does that come about?" asked Frank listlessly.

"Why, don't you see? When the real successful workers are glad to turn their backs, that's the very time when a poor devil like me gets a chance. I did get a brief once, Frank; though you may not believe it. It came in on the Saturday after Good Friday, sent in by a miserly old solicitor who goes to his office 'for his letters' every day out of the three hundred and sixty-five."

"Hope you got a smart fee with it!"

"Fair enough. They will be awfully glad to see you at home, old boy," added Philip, with a change of tone. "We never invited you to Colburn, Frank; my people and yours were estranged, you see; but my mother will rejoice over you: a nephew's place in her heart is still unsupplied. And the governor is a jolly old boy: most ministers are when you know them. You needn't be afraid of him."

"I was never afraid of Mr. Toynbee," said Frank tartly. "He was always one of my

best friends. I should like to see Toynbee again! I hope he doesn't think ill of me."

"Do well for yourself, and then he won't. That's scriptural, Frank."

"I don't feel as if I ought to be paying visits and taking holidays when I've got no home and no work, and no place for myself in all the wide world," said Frank, rather drearily.

"Now don't get into the blues," returned Philip. "It's just the time for a fellow to pay visits, when he can't invite in return; and nobody can say you're neglecting your business when you have none to do."

Frank's face darkened.

"Of course, I'm only chaffing you," Philip added hastily, seeing the cloud. "Next to Ravenscourt, is not our house your home? And what is nearer your duty than a little attention to an aunt—your father's own sister, who would never have been alienated from him but for an influence whose wisdom and kindness you yourself have some cause to doubt?"

Frank did not speak. He knew the allusion was intended for his mother.

"My father is a practical man, too," Philip went on. "He might give you a hint worth getting. He and the mother must have had a hard enough struggle in their own day; and when people once get their eyes well opened they generally keep them so. You can't do better than come with me, Frank. I really want to go; and I wouldn't leave you moping here by yourself."

Frank tacitly yielded.

"It's a wonder you are homesick," he said to Philip. "When you said you did not write to your mother, did you tell an untruth?"

Philip laughed.

"Oh dear, no. In our family my father is the general correspondent. I write to him regularly. But one sometimes has to have a little spar with him about money matters and the like, that one doesn't want the mother to go crying over, or talking about to the girls. Any more coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"The governor hinted to me that she got uneasy if he did not show her my letters, and took to fancying I had the croup or something. So I told her I'd always write to her very self if anything of that sort was wrong. Of course, I shouldn't, you know—not if it was anything serious. But when I get a cold or a headache, I write and tell her so, to maintain the delusion and keep her heart at rest."

"I'm glad I don't care much for you," said Frank, with sudden and hearty emphasis.

"Oh, come, I say, old boy, but I flattered myself that you did," cried Philip. "And so you do, only you don't know it. That's how it always is," he added, with a comical affectation of sentimentality. "One never can get at the truth—let one try as one may!"

"I know you've been very kind to me. I shouldn't have said what I did. You are the only friend I have," said Frank dismally.

"The more's the pity," rejoined Philip, with unabated geniality, "and it's all your own fault. But we'll go home to Colburn and have a jolly time, and you'll get rattled up."

.

In reality, a very kindly little plot had elaborated itself in Philip Connell's mind. He was sincerely troubled about Frank. All the young fellow's sensitiveness seemed mere morbidness to him. As he put it to himself, he would have bantered the "old lady" into a good temper and defied Leonard. Of course, each side of life had its advantages and its drawbacks, home and Bohemian. One did not get such delicious coffee and rolls at one's chamber breakfasts as one got at home ; but then, at home one got no oyster suppers. Dainty was the home drapery, and cosy the home blankets ; but there one must not smoke at all hours and in all places. So the law of compensation, illustrated by these little things, held throughout.

But there seemed no law of compensation for poor Frank. He did not seem to care for the pleasures which remained for his taking. He was civil enough to Philip's London friends, but, with the exception of Gertrude Agate, he remained a mere outsider. He had dropped his cigars too, whether with an eye to thrift or to self-mortification, Philip could

.

not determine. Anyway, Philip began to be rather concerned for him.

"This is the sort of fellow who kills himself sometimes, or goes mad, or runs to the dogs outright," mused the young barrister. "He can't make believe to be happy when he isn't, as most of us do. He takes his misery unmixed, and that sometimes leads, all of a sudden, to doing ditto with brandy. I will not be solely responsible for him any longer. I'll shuffle him off upon the governor. Besides, the sight of our place, and the mother and the girls, will be a very pleasant picture of the charm she is resigning, and then he won't resign 'em. That's the way to tempt your martyrs out of martyrdom."

There was real kindness beneath Philip's surface of heartless cynicism, but it was not the kindness on which a sore heart rests for healing. And if poor Frank had felt desolate at his lonely departure from Ravenstoke, he felt doubly desolate when, in Philip's company, he started from London for Colburn. Before he did so, there was plenty of time to write to the Court and tell his mother of his

intention. He would not seem surreptitiously to change the family habits.

Coltburn was situated in the northern part of the Midlands, and a great part of the journey towards it was sufficiently depressing. After the gentle, daintily-kept slopes and woodlands to the immediate north of London were rapidly passed, there remained little to gaze at, save a succession of flat and dreary fields, till they arrived at the junction where they changed trains. Nor did this improve the prospect, since it only involved divergence from the main and comparatively open route into the crowd of dirty, commonplace, commercial towns, and dark-looking strongholds of mining districts. And as Frank looked down on the rows upon rows of colliers' huts, with the coarse women lounging at their doors, and the unkempt children rising up from their mud-pies and puddles to shout at the passing train, it seemed as if the world had changed as much as himself. For Frank's past experience lay chiefly with sylvan scenery and its smiling woods and dales. It was at this railway junction that they first exchanged

words with the only passenger who had accompanied them from London.

This British silence had not been due to any reserve on Philip's part. He had made several general remarks, and had got no answer from either Frank or the stranger. This stranger was a slight young man, whose small, delicately-cut features and closely-shaven chin allowed his age to be anywhere between twenty and five-and-twenty years. The darkness of his hair and eyes, together with a vague something in his whole bearing, suggested foreign extraction.

"Perhaps he doesn't understand what I say," was Philip's good-humoured mental explanation of this taciturnity, "so I'll speak very slowly next time." But here they at length reached the junction.

As the train slackened speed, the stranger himself spoke. In a low, musical voice, and in the best of English, though with a slightly foreign accent, he addressed Philip.

"Do we wait for the other train on the platform where we alight, or do we require to cross the lines?"

"It depends upon what train one may want," answered Philip readily. "You wait here for the local train to Dingford and Rissit; you cross one bridge for Colburn, two for——"

"Thank you," answered the young man. "I am going to Colburn."

"So are we," said Philip sociably. "If you follow us, you can't go wrong."

"Ah, you know it, then!"

"Know it! I was born at Colburn. I have been passing to and fro all my life. Pleasant little place, Colburn—to those who know it well, though it may not impress a stranger very favourably."

There was no time for more in the haste of changing trains.

"Have you been at Colburn before?" resumed Philip, when they were again seated.

"Never," answered the stranger.

"If I can be of any service to you, I shall be glad," Philip went on. "I think the Stag Hotel might suit you. The Royal is no better, though it is ever so much dearer, and

strangers get 'taken in' there in two or three ways."

"Very many thanks," said the young man again. "I should have been very much indebted to you under some circumstances, but an acquaintance has already taken apartments for me."

"Oh, you know some Colburn people?" cried Philip. "That's nice. I dare say we shall come across you again: my folks know everybody. You may have heard the name. Every Colburnite, of whatever sect, has had some sort of contact with the Reverend James Connell: and he is my father."

The foreigner's pale, sensitive face flushed; and there came a curious flash as of awakening in the dark dreamy eyes.

"My friends in Colburn are—is—one of Mr. Connell's younger sons," he said: "Percy Connell."

"My brother Percy!" responded Philip heartily, holding out his hand. "I'm Philip, the barrister in London, you know: you'll have heard of me. Running down, you see, to be a boy at home for a few days."

"I have heard of Mr. Philip," said the foreigner, taking the proffered hand, and speaking with that inflection of voice and uplifting of the eye which conveys the most delicate of compliments. "But I cannot expect he has ever heard of me. I had the felicity to make friends with your family last year, when they were taking their holiday by the sea at Sandgate. They—Mr. Percy—have kindly kept up a correspondence with me since. My name is Marco Learli."

Nobody notices when a foreigner's nouns, pronouns, and verbs do not perfectly agree.

"I have heard of you, then," said Philip; "and have a distinct idea that you were a great item in the enjoyment of that Sandgate holiday. I am glad you should be down when I am."

And he rather wondered within himself why the household hospitality had not been extended to this acquaintance. For besides that the Connells had a spare bedroom, which had grown absolutely shabby with constant use, the young people could, in their own phraseology, "condense" them-

selves to any extent. But the stranger's next speech explained this.

"Mrs. Connell invited me to stay in her house," he said, in that soft, musical voice. "And I should have been most delighted to do so, but I contemplate a long visit, and it will be necessary for me to pursue my usual avocation—that of artist. Yet I hope to see very much of my kind friends, the thought of whom makes Colburn feel like home to the poor exile who has not even a country of his own."

Philip was accustomed to meet Italians at Miss Agate's house, and he quite understood their pathetic allusions to their land—in those days lying dismembered among alien tyrannies. But this young fellow was so handsome, and so sad, and so sweet-voiced, that Philip thought within himself it was more than likely the mother must have opened a very warm corner of her heart to him.

"This is Detting," observed Philip presently, as the train stopped at a dirty little platform, and the stranger and Frank both looked out. "Here they collect the tickets

for Colburn," continued Philip, getting his own ready. "And here"—and he made a dive at a small newspaper boy, shouting on the platform—"here is the dear old *Colburn News*; with all its advertisements of desirable and elegant villas close to the railway station, and of eligible and promising servants with three months' bad character from their last place. Let us see what's going on. We generally have some sort of entertainment on the wing—negro minstrels, or a fat pig, or something else, to enliven the natives."

Philip ran his eyes over the paper, turning it from side to side. Suddenly an amused expression, blended with surprise, lighted up his face.

"Ha! here's fun! We shall have some sport with this, Frank. Listen.

"Arrived in Colburn; the Great Oriental Mystery, and lineal successor of the Delphic Oracle, Madame Allebasi Elah! Who can look into the Past, see into the Future, and answer questions concerning things you wish to know. In your own interest, lose no time in consulting her. Interviews granted, 5s.—

Private houses visited, 10s. 6d. At home between 12 and 4, at Daylight Villa, Colburn. All letters promptly attended to.'

"What a spree we'll have with her!" was Philip's delighted comment, as he looked up from the paper. "She'll tell our fortunes for us, Frank—and no doubt promise me the Lord-Chancellorship."

"I wish she could tell mine—really," answered Frank.

"We will go to her, old boy. 'Twill be a break in the proprieties of home, if nothing else. Mind, though, we shall have to keep it dark from the governor. And now here we are," broke off Philip, as the train steamed into the station: "and here are Percy and Louisa—brought forth by my telegram. Did they expect you also by this train?" he asked, turning to Learli.

"I think so," said the young man, in a faint voice. He looked paler than ever now, perhaps in contrast to the vivid bloom of Louisa Connell, who greeted him almost before the train had stopped. She was a tall, handsome girl, with a slight Raven look

about her, inherited from her mother. Even dispirited Frank felt that it would be pleasant if she seemed glad to see him—as glad as she was to see young Learli, for instance. Percy Connell was but a new edition of Philip, and was instantly on the easiest terms with the cousin he had never in his life seen before. Both the sister and the brother pressed their invitations on the Italian.

“It’s a downright sell that you are not coming home with us altogether,” said Percy.

“Can’t you be induced to come even yet?” pleaded Louisa. “Are not Philip and—our cousin—extra attractions?”

“I need no extra attractions, you know,” said the young man, with a strange, ghastly smile. “Do not press on me these liberal invitations, or you may have too much of me.”

Perhaps, during the running to and fro after the luggage, he and the young lady found time for the interchange of a few private observations. But what could lie in these hurried remarks to account for the gravity

and pain which had settled on Louisa's blooming face, as they parted from him, and entered the Connell chaise? Philip took the reins, and Frank was made to take the seat of honour beside him, Louisa and Percy sitting behind.

"Learli's looking bad, Louie," said that outspoken youth, who was own brother to Philip in the way of using his tongue everlastingly. "It gave me quite a start to see him. We shall have to feed him up, or he'll be going off in a decline."

Louisa answered nothing. Her face was turned from him.

"The cousin looks a handsome fellow," continued Percy, in a lowered voice. "Do you think the lady-aunt down at the Court might make it up with all of us if one of you girls married back into the Raven family?"

In reply Miss Connell made one of those "down-setting" remarks which elder sisters know how to administer, but with an added tartness of tone which gave her brother distinctly to understand that he was treading on delicate ground somehow, and had better

be silent. As it was quite impossible for him to keep quiet, he bent forward and devoted himself to his seniors in front.

"Look at those placards," he said, pointing to some flaming posters on the wall they were then passing; and which Philip and Frank saw to be further announcements of "The Oriental Mystery."

"Well, who is she? and what is the fun?" asked Philip.

"Goodness knows who she is," said the young fellow. "She only came into Colburn yesterday, and I've been to see her already. Such a lark! I'll tell you all about it when I get a chance; you'll have to go to her yourself, Philip.—Here we are at home."

Philip drew up gladly. "And here are the young tomboys!" he cried, leaping down, as two little girls of ten and twelve rushed wildly out of the garden-gate. "As saucy and sturdy as ever," he added, kissing them heartily.

"And that is the new governess," said Percy, as a small, sweet-looking young woman in deep mourning came forward, watchful

over her charges. "Miss Alice Cleare," announced he to Frank: "and she's one of the right sort," he added in a whisper.

And Frank Raven, in the days to come, often remembered that rough-and-ready introduction.





CHAPTER XVII.

"THE ORIENTAL MYSTERY."

FRANK RAVEN went into the house of the Reverend James Connell in a perfect state of bewilderment, not due to the minister's hearty greeting, or to Mrs. Connell's warm and tearful embrace. Could this be the same world which had seemed to him so dark and cold hardly half an hour ago?

"And so our dear Miss Cleare knows you already!" cried Mina, the youngest girl, dancing round Frank in high delight, for it was no Connell fashion to be shy. "When she heard a Mr. Frank Raven was coming down with our brother Philip, she told us how she had met you once when she had

lost her way, and how kind you were. But she said you would not remember her."

"And you do, don't you, Frank?" laughed Philip.

"Why should I not—when Miss Cleare remembers me?" demanded Frank. And Philip laughed again, and thought Frank was readier than one might suppose. But Frank's colour had heightened considerably; and Miss Cleare's face was turned away.

A bountiful meal was already spread on the long dining-room table, and a most hospitable fire was glowing in the grate, very welcome in the chill evening.

The strange cousin was the object of everybody's interest and solicitude, but the Connells were accustomed to strangers, and were not awed into silence by his presence. The two younger sisters had their budget of news for Philip; Percy was telling his father some items of town gossip he had heard at the railway station, and Mrs. Connell kept assuring Frank how glad, how very glad she was to see him—her dear brother's favourite boy! And she was so pleased to see he had

the Raven face—yes; he certainly had the Raven face. Not that she could say he was like any particular Raven she remembered either in real life or in pictures.

“Pictures!” cried Percy, catching at the word. “Why, I forgot to tell you—just fancy our forgetting it, Louie!—that Learli is here. He is safely arrived, mother.”

“Why, didn’t you bring him straight here, as I bade you and Louisa to do—if only for this first evening—when he did come?” asked Mrs. Connell quite severely. Her children could never do anything worse in her eyes than neglect hospitality.

“I’m sure I pressed him hard enough—and so, I suppose, did Louisa,” said Percy carelessly. “I dare say he was tired after his journey. He looked like a ghost as he got out of the train.”

“The appearance of Colburn must have scared him, then,” remarked Philip; “he seemed well enough on our journey down. But these foreigners are generally pale.”

“He always struck me as delicate when we were staying at Sandgate,” said Mrs. Connell,

"One could never rely on him. He would be as bright and cheerful as possible one hour, and languid and dull the next. I thought the long walks he took did not agree with him : he was always worse after them : and as for his sketching trips, when he went off for a day or two—they will be the death of him by-and-by, if they go on wearing him out as they seemed to wear him then. Does he call himself quite well now, Louisa ?"

"He seems in rather low spirits," Louisa replied, evasively.

"I'm glad he is to settle here awhile," said kind Mrs. Connell ; "we shall be able to look after him a little."

"He spoke this evening as if he might go away again very soon," observed Louisa, half reluctantly.

There was a chorus of exclamations—
"How is that ?"—"Why ?"

"Is he alone in England ?" asked Philip.

"Yes," spoke up the minister. "It appears he is an orphan, and was brought up by strangers in his own country ; which he only left some two years ago."

"I have at times wondered if he is really an orphan," observed Mrs. Connell, "sometimes even whether he really thinks he is one. He said something to me once——" she paused. "Ah, it was nothing," she continued—"nothing but a hint—that the best sons of his unhappy country were her prisoners and her exiles—and that even in lands of liberty they were not safe from spies and treachery. His parents were noble," he said. "Perhaps they are living yet in some poor disguise!"

"Oh, I think he was romancing then!" said Percy. "It's my opinion that Marco Learli *can* romance," and he looked significantly across the table to Louisa.

"There may be plenty of room for romance to play its part in many Italian lives," observed Mr. Connell. "When we think of the crowds of political prisoners, and the possible fates of their deprived families, it is easy to understand the tragedies, the dramas, that must exist among them: and the hopes—the dreams—of what some fortunate revolution may restore to them. The miserable are often comforted by the imagination. I am

told that foundlings commonly indulge in the belief that they have some specially good blood in their veins, and are the lost or stolen children of distinguished parents."

"Ay," said Philip, "that possibility must be a comfort for those people in the world who don't know who they are. They must be pretty numerous. We know one—a young lady—don't we?" he added, nodding at Frank. "She was an old acquaintance of mine in London, and has just been engaged as companion to Frank's mother at Ravenscourt."

"Ah, your poor mother! How is she?" said Mrs. Connell, in a whisper to Frank. "I hope she will not be troubled at your coming here? I should not like to pain her just now—glad as I am to see you; and quite sure, too, that you have done right in coming."

"She is pretty well, thank you," answered Frank. "I wrote to tell her I was coming here, and I mean to write to her from your house to-night."

"That is right," assented his aunt; "when

we do anything that may seem to want explanation, it is best to take the matter into our own hands in time." And then she sighed.

Never for one moment had she repented of her marriage with the Rev. Mr. Connell ; but they had long ago both agreed that it might have been possible to have got their wills less wilfully. They had run off and got married without previous warning or notice to the Ravens. It had seemed to them at the time like a stroke of good generalship and great strength. Later years had brought the conviction that it had been a confession of weakness—a sign that they felt they might not withstand the arguments and opposition they would have had to encounter had they announced their intended union in a more regular way. The offence had not been unpardonable, but frank-speaking Mrs. Connell never denied that it had brought a two-fold punishment—giving her brother some justification for his estrangement ; and his wife some excuse for her encouragement of its persistence—and worse still, making the

couple themselves feel a little uncertain about their own children's confidences.

"Yes, Frank," she said, "you did right."

The conversation at the other end of the table was growing animated. A remark of Percy's began it.

"Those people who do not know who they are," cried he, "should consult 'the Oriental Mystery' we have just got down here. I wonder how many will go to her?"

"Poor foolish things!" cried his father. "They must be sorely tempted, to try so forlorn a hope as the consulting of impostors. The unfortunate are always inclined to test desperate resources."

"Of course, this one could tell them anything she chose," Percy went on, "and they could not prove whether it was true or false."

"No, and what an awkward fix they might get into," observed Philip. "Fancy if she said, 'You are the son of so-and-so,' naming some prince or millionaire; would it be possible to refrain from going to that magnate and saying, 'I am your son; claim me!' The

result might be a police inquiry, medical opinions on sanity, and free entertainment in mad-house or gaol."

"One wonders whether some chain of circumstances forged by mystery, acting upon ignorance and credulity, may not occasionally lie at the bottom of the extraordinary pretensions described in the police reports, and made by people of respectable exterior and presumably sane manners," exclaimed Mr. Connell.

"Our young friend, Aunt Raven's new companion, got rather a blow the other day," narrated Philip, who apparently saw no reason for observing reticence here on the subject. "She chanced to see an advertisement which she thought showed some connection with her own history, and she went to the address indicated and found that it was really the case of a missing child. But it all came to nothing."

"I trust it won't disturb the girl's mind," remarked Mrs. Connell. "It is a dangerous thing to get fixed ideas of this kind: they lead to unpleasantness sometimes."

By-and-by the minister rose.

"I am sorry that I and Mrs. Connell have to leave you for the early part of this evening," he said; "we have to attend an important meeting in connection with our Sunday-school and Bible-class. But we shall hope to get a quiet hour with you and Philip afterwards, Frank."

When he and his wife were departing, the whole family ran after their parents and took a warmer leave of them than would have been thought necessary at Ravenscourt before a month's separation. Frank and Alice were left for a moment alone.

"They are all so kind," she said, "I am quite at home here already. I am sure you will enjoy your visit."

He was thinking how new was her brother's lonely grave in the little churchyard at Gerstowe; newer even than his father's coffin in the dreary Raven vaults. And yet she was not afraid to be content and thankful—though, as he looked at her, he felt sure that the sorrow she had so bravely borne since he first saw her, had worn her somewhat. On

that evening in the lanes, he had not noticed she was so thin—and, pretty as he had thought her then, surely she had grown sweeter now !

“ And now we must go to our lessons,” said Alice Cleare, as the young men came back into the room, after changing their dress for the evening. She extended a hand to each of her pupils, as the two children came running up to her.

“ Oh, may we not have a remission of duty this one night, Miss Cleare ?” pleaded Philip engagingly.

Miss Cleare smiled, but shook her head.

“ Pleasure will last the longer if it is not taken in one whole continuous dose,” she replied.

“ That’s a bad compliment to me somehow,” cried Philip. “ How is it ? I believe it is a didactic way of saying that when the novelty of my society wears off, there’s nothing else left !”

But the two little girls assented, without any but a playful, mock demurring. They had learned to like and obey Miss Cleare.

"Dear me! I should not have thought she would be such a martinet!" pondered Percy aloud. "There's something at the bottom of this. Does she think she's in our way, I wonder?" He jumped up to run after her. She had already become a great favourite with the lad.

"I say, Miss Cleare," he cried frankly, standing at the foot of the stairs, just as her skirt disappeared round the landing. "I hope you're not going off because you think we might prefer to be alone? Never such a mistake in the world! Come back instantly!" commanded the young despot.

Miss Cleare came back a few steps, but it was only to bend over the banister, and whisper, "One can't make acquaintance with a crowd, you know, and Mr. Raven is a stranger. He will be at home with us all the more quickly by taking us in detachments. That is why I go away with the children. I am quite sure you do not wish me to go," she added, for the girl hated every appearance of that self-isolation which the lonely are some-

times apt to affect when it is not imposed on them.

"Whew! You're a rock of sense, as our old nurse used to say," answered Percy. "I'll go back at once."

"You need not repeat what I said," hinted Alice Cleare, alarmed.

"No," he answered: "I'll uphold you as a martyr to duty in the cause of education." And Percy retreated to the drawing-room.

"Unsuccessful, eh?" laughed Philip, moving his chair a little that his brother might edge in beside him. "Could not you wile her back?"

"What is it?" asked Percy, with careless nonchalance, as if he had forgotten the errand he had started on. "Oh, Miss Cleare!—no, she won't come. It is bad to be irregular with lessons. She's a jolly girl, though."

The boy's frank commendation, couched in the one phrase he applied to every feminine creature whom he liked, between the ages of seven and seventy, sounded like flat blasphemy to Frank. *He* was more inclined to

regard Alice Cleare as an angel than as a "jolly girl."

"And now I will tell you about 'the Oriental Mystery,'" cried Percy. "You must go to see her, Philip. You can't think how queer she is. I'm almost beginning to think there must be something at the bottom of these things."

"Of course there is," said Philip drily. "Plenty of impudence and a little chicanery."

"Ah, it's easy saying that, Philip. I should have said so myself yesterday; but to-day I feel there are some things I can't explain—things quite beyond my understanding!"

"I should hope so, for the sake of the universe," laughed Philip.

"Wait till you hear," was Percy's good-natured exhortation. "To begin with: do you remember Daylight Villa?"

"I believe so. Is it not the yellow brick house close behind the railway station: which was built by that queer man who lectures on phrenology and mesmerism?"

"Lectures!" echoed Percy—"he has been dead more than two years, Philip. Yes,

that's the identical house, Daylight Villa, and his widow now lets it out in furnished lodgings——"

"He must have named it in a symbolic sense," interposed Philip, "for, as a matter of fact, it never gets any daylight unadulterated by railway smoke and steam. Are the lodgings advertised as cheerful and attractive?"

"I don't know; they are generally full. How you interrupt one, Philip! Strolling players, and circus-people, and such-like lodge there."

"A suspicious class of life in which to find a mystic oracle!" commented Philip.

"Oh, some of them are decent enough," said Percy eagerly. "Why, there was a fellow here calling himself 'The Bare-back-rider of the Pampas,' and he supported a blind widowed mother and three sisters. My father found that out, because the poor fellow got a broken rib. I can tell you, Philip, he respected that man."

"A valuable member of society, no doubt," gravely observed Philip. "Go on, lad."

"Well, I went to see her this morning."

said Percy : " I mean the Oracle. And when I got to Daylight Villa, I felt quite taken aback as to what I should ask for—the queer foreign name had gone clean out of my head, and I didn't like to inquire for 'the Oriental Mystery.' But the dirty little servant seemed to guess what I had come for, for while I was having a try at the outlandish syllables, she opened the parlour-door, and ushered me in."

"Into the presence of the Mystery," assented Philip.

"And a rare mystery she is!" Percy answered. "The window-blinds were down : and they are red blinds, as you may see from the outside; and from first to last, all the while I stayed, I could not decide whether she was thirty or sixty!"

"Always a mystery !" ejaculated Philip.

"She rose up to meet me as if she knew me quite well," continued Percy. "'Sit down, my friend,' she said : 'you have done wisely to come while my powers are fresh. I believe I shall be able to speak to you with the open vision. I have seen you before—not in the flesh—but——'"

"Oh, this is delightful," interrupted Louisa Connell, who had listened in silence. "It makes me quite creep!"

"So it made me," owned the ingenuous Percy. "But I soon reflected, perhaps this is what she says to everybody. So I wouldn't even ask her where or how she had seen me, lest she should manage to make more out of my questions than I should out of her answers. I believe I was born for a lawyer, Philip, mind you, though I'm only to be an engineer."

"Like enough, boy. At odd moments I say I was born to be a general. Well?"

"Well. 'I have seen you when I was sitting quite alone, many miles away from here,' she said. 'At that time it was not revealed to me who you were. I think it is being revealed to me now. One of your names is a great and famous name in history—is it not? Answer me no more than yes or no.'—I wouldn't trust myself with one word, Philip, I was so afraid I might let out something : so I just nodded in answer."

"Silence is golden," put in Philip.

" 'I see, in my mind's eye, a bunch of keys passed through a gate on a spear,' she went on. 'Do you know what that means?' Still I would not do anything else but nod; but I couldn't help nodding vigorously."

"Why, she must have meant the legend about the Northumbrian Percies—or Pierce-eyes," said Louisa, under her breath.

"Of course she did," assented Percy eagerly; "and then she added, 'Your other name is not so grand a one; but it belongs to good folk. In a minute I think I may be able to say it. I see it before me, but the letters flicker in the vision. It is either Connen or Connell. I think it is Connell.' There now, what do you think of that?"

"Turn round and face me, Percy," said Philip Connell mysteriously.

Percy turned and faced him.

"I'm telling you nothing but the real truth," he said, half thinking his brother was inclined to give him the nursery ordeal of "looking him straight in the eyes."

Philip laid a hand on each of the lad's shoulders, and looked on this side of him,

and on that, but did not seem to get the satisfaction he had expected. Then he released him.

"Now get out your handkerchief, Percy."

"What on earth are you after?" asked the astonished Percy. "Is my own brother turning into a European mystery?"

"Get out your handkerchief," reiterated Philip. And Percy obeyed.

Philip took it, and turned up its corners. He found the marks on it, and carefully examined them. They were the initials D.M.

"That was sent back from the laundry instead of one of mine," observed Percy. "And I didn't notice the mistake when I took it out of the drawer this morning."

"And have you used this handkerchief all day, lad? Are you sure you took no other with you to Daylight Villa?"

"Quite sure. Why do you ask?"

"Because I thought this astute sorceress might have read your name thereon, or in the inside of your shirt-collar," answered Philip. "It seems this explanation won't hold good, though of course some other will. Well,

what else did she tell you? Try to keep to her own words."

"I have kept to them, Philip. Well, she looked hard at me, and she said, 'You are very happy at home. You are one of a large family, and many of you, sons and daughters, are out in the world. But you have a very pretty sister at home, yet.'"

Louisa's cheeks were flaming. Philip shouted with laughter.

"That's mistake number one," he cried, in ungallant brotherly banter.

Percy himself began to giggle, as he proceeded.

"Next she said, 'There's a strange visitor coming to see you to-day: somebody who has never been in your town before.' Ah, but she did not mean you," he added, as Frank bent forward with deepening interest. "'For,' she said, 'the visitor comes from afar. I see great waves rolling between him and the graves of his forefathers. His face is pale and his voice is low, but there is fire in his heart.' Yes, Louisa," nodding at his sister, for the girl had started forward with

parted lips, "you see whom she must have meant—young Learli. And when I saw him this afternoon, I thought that she might well call his face pale!"

"And did you still refrain from questions?" asked Philip.

"I did not see any reason to do so over this," admitted Percy. "No. 'Is this stranger coming to stay with us?' I asked—of course I knew Learli was not to do so. 'I think not,' she answered; 'but I seem to see him under your roof for this one night.' So——"

"Mistake number two," cried Philip.

"But it might so easily have been true," exclaimed Louisa, rather excitedly. "I'm sure, Percy, you remember how mamma urged us to bring Marco home with us for to-night if we met him. She can't bear strangers to be left feeling lonely in lodgings."

"Well, and we pressed him to come," said Percy; "and I, knowing then of the prophecy, and how everything else had turned out true, made quite sure he would come. But he didn't, you see."

"I cannot think why he would not!" mused Louisa, gazing into the fire.

"Anyway, his coming into the town to-day was true," Percy remarked. "And not a soul, save ourselves, knew that; and we were not quite sure of it; so she could not have heard it."

"And, pray, didn't she next foretell my home-coming—and our cousin Frank's first visit to his kinsfolk?" questioned Philip.

"No, she did not. And I wanted to make her say something about Miss Cleare. I put her on the track by asking if she did not see another young lady at home as well as my sister. But she said, 'No, she didn't.'"

"It's an insult to be omitted in a prophecy," said Philip gravely. "But I think I hear Miss Cleare's step. Is this weighty matter to be kept secret from her?"

"Oh dear, no," answered Percy, as the governess entered. "I have told her about it already; and she only read me a lecture for visiting such people on the sly."

"Then we are to understand that you don't approve of mysteries, Miss Cleare?"

said Philip, as he rose and placed a chair for her between himself and Louisa.

"Not of mysteries which only tell us our own names, and about visitors we expect already," she replied with a smile. "I think most of us have better mysteries than those in our everyday lives."

"But not so strange and incomprehensible," interposed Louisa.

"Far more strange and incomprehensible, I think," answered Alice. "Has it ever struck you that no 'wonder' can be more wonderful than many processes of nature are?"

"Then you don't believe in ghosts—or the second sight—or clairvoyance?" asked Louisa.

Alice sat in silence for a moment. And when she answered she spoke softly.

"I do not refuse to believe in anything," she said. "And I think our own hearts often feel that they touch the outside of secrets they may not yet enter upon. But I always feel that these lie in a region quite closed to the world, not excepting the professional traffickers in the marvellous."

"Ah," said Philip, with a curious smile, "I fancy you believe in the ghosts which two people do not see at the same time, and in presentiments which one would not utter to mankind in general for untold gold. And those are precisely the ghosts and the clairvoyance which no science will ever be able to disprove, though it may continue to treat them with a decent incredulity—like that with which the unmusical receive hints of the mysteries of music."

Somehow, at that moment, Frank's eyes and Miss Cleare's met.

And close upon that a servant entered the room to say that two people had called about some chapel business—a Dorcas party, or something of that sort—and as Mr. and Mrs. Connell were both out, they would be glad to speak with Miss Louisa, which broke up the little circle gathered round the fire.

END OF VOL. I.

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